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The Politics of Crisis Management in China

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Politics and
International Studies

Department of Politics and International Studies
University of Warwick
October 2013

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Acknowledgements

I take this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Shaun Breslin, without whose support I would never have been able to complete this thesis. I thank him for answering every of my questions promptly, at work, at weekends and on holiday; for saving me from mental breakdowns at various stages of this research; and for his constant encouragement that not only turned me into a confident researcher, but a resilient individual. I also want to say a massive thank you to my parents for their support for the entire duration of my study in the UK, and especially for their understanding on me spending more than four years undertaking this project of research. Their understanding is exceptionally invaluable given the predominant social context in China where research that does not directly yield monetary returns (such as this one) is mostly deemed useless. For this reason, I am extremely grateful to them for being supportive to my choice. This thesis is therefore dedicated to my parents. My special thanks also goes to my best friends: Anyao Hu, Da Li, Dandan Zhang, Mengwei Li, Xuyan Yang and Yuanfang Zhang, for their emotional support that keeps me motivated throughout the PhD life. I love you all! Finally, I thank NHS staff for taking care of me, without their excellent treatment it would have to take me even longer to complete this thesis.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work and original research. This thesis has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

Abstract

This thesis investigates how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has tactically managed and defused major crises between 2002 and 2008 which put its credibility and legitimacy to the test. Contrary to conventional wisdom that major crises are likely to challenge and threaten regime stability in authoritarian systems or even undermine their viability, this thesis argues that the CCP has managed to sustain its political hegemony to date through the manipulation of these major crises and through the maximum tinkering with the current political system it reigns over.

In order to explain why manipulation is the key in the CCP's successful crisis management, this thesis first develops a critical reassessment of the conception of crisis and elaborates on crisis's tripartite political utilities. These are (a) shift the dominating paradigm, (b) centralise political power and (c) (re) gain popularity and legitimacy. These altogether form an analytical framework for crisis, which is followed by a chapter that sets the backdrop against which our case studies unfold and explains why the Chinese context is particularly favourable for crisis manipulation.

The thesis then proceeds with three case studies: the 2003 SARS epidemic, the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and the Sanlu milk scandal occurred in the same year. The thesis suggests that although the CCP's responses were not flawless, and not always timely, it managed to manipulate all three crises in its favour via the aforementioned political utilities and subsequently defused these crises. At the same time, its Leninist structure was able to unleash formidable mobilisation capacity to help the regime rapidly bring situations under control. Overall, the CCP's crisis management efficacy was satisfactory in the short term.

Nevertheless, the thesis concludes that despite the short term usefulness of crisis manipulation, in the long term the efficacy of the same strategy as well as the political utility of crisis are decaying, as illustrated in reference to more recent crises that stretched the CCP's credibility. Therefore, the CCP is in need of embarking on substantive political reform in order to develop an alternative crisis displacement mechanism.

This thesis makes an original contribution to the existing literature in the field. It complements the public administration and public management literature by bringing politics back in. It also updates the empirical knowledge base of past studies as well as offering a comparison of crisis responses. This is a timely contribution to the study of Chinese crisis management and to the study of the nature of Chinese politics.

List of Abbreviations

CCP: Chinese Communist Party
CCTV: China Central Television
CYL: Communist Youth League
FDI: Foreign Direct Investment
GAQSIQ: General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine
GDP: Gross Domestic Product
GONGO: Government Organised Non-Governmental Organisation
KMT: Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party)
LSG: Leading Small Group
MOCA: Ministry of Civil Affairs
MOH: Ministry of Health
MOR: Ministry of Railways
NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation
NPC: National People's Congress
NTS: Non-Traditional Security
PC: Party Congress
PLA: People's Liberation Army
PRC: People's Republic of China
PSC: Politburo Standing Committee
ROC: Republic of China
SARS: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndromes
SDC: Scientific Development Concept
SOE: State Owned Enterprise
WHO: World Health Organisation
WMD: Weapons of Mass Destruction
WTO: World Trade Organisation

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Intellectual Curiosity and Identifying the Topic

This thesis explores the crucial question of China's statecraft of crisis management. China is a country whose image is full of contradictions. From a state centric perspective, China looks strong. It has recently become the second largest economy in the world and the world's largest exporter (BBC, 2011). Many have also argued that China is set to become the next superpower and some countries are already treating China based on what power and influence it will have in the future (Breslin, 2009). After the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 in which China was among the least affected major economies, admiration and fear alike regarding China's ascendancy are only growing in momentum, alongside increasing interests in the Chinese model.

At the same time, however, China is also becoming a source of great uncertainty for the rest of the world, especially in the realm of Non-Traditional Security (NTS). For instance, both originated in China, the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndromes (SARS) Epidemic and the 2008 Milk Scandal caused significant disruption to international trade and travel. Economists also projected various scenarios where a slowdown in Chinese growth would affect a number of countries dependent on China for trade in resources and commodities, and even threaten world growth overall (AFP, 2013; Dyck et al, 2011; Frangos, 2011). In 2005, Robert Zoellick, then US Deputy Secretary of State, expected China to play the role of a 'responsible stakeholder' in the international system (Zoellick, 2005). At the time of writing this thesis and in light of China's rapid rise in influence since 2005, the reverse is perhaps also true – that many countries with close ties with China (its

neighbours in the region in particular), have become important stakeholders in China's own development. For their economic and security stakes, they expect China to be stable, predictable and crisis-proof simply because China is 'too big to fail'.

China responded to these concerns from its international stakeholders with rhetorical reaffirmations of its commitment to a 'peaceful rise', 'peaceful development' and building a 'harmonious world'. Regardless of China's true intentions as a responsible player in the international arena, these statements failed to assure other countries over whether China has the *internal* strength to prevent *domestically* originated crises from toppling its projected promising development. The international community remains equally unconvinced that China has perfected its system of governance wherein the inherent contradictions between a market economy and Leninist political management are constantly undermining the efficacy of each other. If such a rising but crisis-ridden state is said to 'rule the world' sometime soon (Jacques, 2012), its growth will only amplify the opportunities as well as uncertainties it brings to the rest of the world. Therefore, before we speculate on what China is going to become, we should ask ourselves the prior question: How stable is China?

As such, a critical and systematic analysis of China's past and present crisis behaviour is of crucial importance to the understanding of this world's largest non-democratic one-party state¹. This topic has multifaceted scholarly and policy significance. It contributes to ongoing academic debates in regard to the nature of Chinese politics in general and the nature of China's state capacity in particular. It should also be of great interests to those in the policy community who are concerned with managing China's rise. To be sure, the main purpose of this thesis is not to predict where China is heading. Instead, this thesis investigates the strengths and weaknesses of China's crisis management

¹ Owing to the fact that in most cases the CCP and the Chinese state are integrated, in this thesis the terms of Party, state and Party-state are used interchangeably unless otherwise stated.

regime through case studies. Based on this, it assesses China's capacity and preparedness when facing similar crises in the future.

1.2 Background

In fact, the debate on the sustainability of China's political system has been going on ever since 1989 when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) suffered a grave legitimacy crisis due to the Tiananmen crackdown. After Tiananmen, perspectives in the western scholarly community regarding the destiny of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the CCP were overwhelmingly pessimistic. Scholars had repeatedly predicted that the fate of the CCP would simply follow that of communist parties in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Baum, 1992; 1996; Gilley, 2005; Nathan, 2003). The only uncertainty remained regarding this 'moribund system...is usually about when, not whether, fundamental political change will occur and what it will look like' (Goldstein, 1994:727).

What lay at the heart of these projections was the assumption that the communist regime in China was extremely crisis-prone, and would not be able to withstand another major crisis in the years to come. The period of political terror and economic slowdown during the Tiananmen interlude added to the impression that the CCP had become a regime where sustainability rested more on coercion than performance. For such a vulnerable regime, it was not surprising that when interpreting China, many academics, policy practitioners and journalists applied the established wisdom of the relationship between crisis and regime stability; that is, crises more often than not undermine regime stability and even lead to its demise.

Writings on the vulnerability of China vis-à-vis crisis have proliferated since the 1990s, and they can be labelled as the 'China collapse thesis'. The rhetorical but

influential, *The Coming Collapse of China*, offered the boldest and bleakest prospect of China. Gordon Chang (2001) predicted that the country's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) would accelerate the exposure of all structural problems and contribute to a holistic economic crisis, after which the CCP would fall from power. Susan Shirk also argues that the fragility of China's political system is vulnerable to domestic social crises and unrest growing in scale and frequency, which have produced a paranoia mentality among the Chinese leadership who worry that 'their days in power are numbered' (Shirk, 2007:7). For Minxin Pei (2002; 2006), China is trapped in its gradualist transition which results in a decentralised predatory state and gives rise to a multitude of governance crises. Others point to a looming legitimacy crisis besetting the current system (Gilley, 2008; Heberer and Schubert, 2008). Even in the PRC academic system, the indefinite longevity of the CCP is not automatically assumed. 30 percent of the scholarly literature on regime legitimacy published between 2003 and 2007 expressed concern on a looming legitimacy crisis (Holbig and Gilley, 2010).

On a slightly different note, a separate but related 'China threat thesis' was derived from the collapse thesis. Given the post-1989 CCP regime's weak legitimacy and its strategy to replace communism with nationalism as the convincing ideology to keep itself in power, when facing major domestic crises, the Chinese leadership might take the risk of unleashing the nationalist genie out of the bottle as a uniting force to hold the fragile system together (Kristof, 1993). In the worst case, that could also mean fabricating an international crisis in order to deflect a domestic crisis (Shirk, 2007). In other words, 'it is China's internal fragility, not its economic or military strength, that presents the greatest danger to [the rest of the world]' (Shirk, 2007:6).

Yet most of the above mentioned scenarios did not come true, and those crises that did affect China, they were quickly contained and their damaging impact on the regime

remained limited. China's political trajectory since 1992 has turned out to be rather stable and increasingly predictable. The CCP has successfully undergone three leadership transitions peacefully (from Jiang to Hu to Xi). It has also managed to survive *all* major crises without implementing substantive political reform. To name a few, the 1998 Floods in the Yangtze River and Songhua River, the 1999 Falungong crisis, the 2003 SARS Epidemic, the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and the Sanlu Milk Scandal in the same year. When the Jasmine Revolution swept through the Arab world and brought down a number of authoritarian regimes there, the CCP stood firmly even if an aspiration for democratic change was transmitted into China. Despite market transition during the same period, the CCP gradually reinforced its control over state and society. Its membership grew from 51 million in 1992 to more than 80 million in 2011 (Xinhua, 2003; 2011d).

At the international level, after the 1995-6 Taiwan Strait Missile Crisis, China's behaviour has become more moderate and considerate. It still occasionally acts assertively on traditional security issues where territorial integrity was at stake. For NTS threats including those with a transnational dimension, such as the control of diseases, humanitarian crises and food safety issues, China has behaved more cooperatively with the international community, and has largely acted as a 'status quo' power.

This relative stability on both domestic and international fronts for more than two decades not only reflects China's strong desire to maintain the status quo of managed liberalisation under one party rule, but also a commensurate capacity to do so. The contrast between negative projections and the reality of the CCP's unexpected longevity amid frequent crises perplexed the China studies community. Such a contrast also suggests that this crucial niche regarding China's statecraft of crisis management has been under-researched, or that previous studies on the topic are outdated.

1.3 The State of the Field

In response to the CCP's unexpected longevity amid frequent crises, scholars have provided different explanations. These can be grouped into two broad categories; institutional and structural. The institutional approach looks at such factors as the formation and adherence to established norms and rules, rational bureaucracy, technocratic governance, limited accountability and 'input institutions' (Nathan, 2003; Yang, 2004), which arguably have engendered a considerable degree of 'authoritarian resilience' for the regime (Nathan, 2003). The structural approach, on the other hand, focuses on popular support for the regime from each major social stratum. Current findings suggest that neither the middle class (Goodman, 2008), nor the working class (Perry, 2007), has enough appetite for liberal political change. The CCP has thus retained its political hegemony through co-opting new economic and social elites into the system while divide and rule the working class.

These are all insightful explanations to the CCP's viability. However, they mostly focused on the conduct of normal politics. More precisely, they put the emphasis on how have institutionalisation and structural impediments in the time of normal politics have worked in favour of the regime to prevent crises from occurring. Unfortunately, with a few exceptions (where the crises studied were primarily localised ones), the question of how did the CCP actually respond to crises when they did arise, largely remained unanswered².

² For an excellent account on localised crises or contentious politics staged by particular social groups, see Hays Gries and Rosen (2004). Nonetheless, the types of crisis discussed in this volume still did not qualify for crisis politics since the contentions involved were mostly 'rightful resistance', a sometimes confrontational but largely institutionalised form of popular political participation conducted within the parameters of normal politics, which could be potentially legitimacy-enhancing for the regime if handled well (more details in Chapter 3). By making the statement that the question of crisis politics remained largely unanswered, the author meant that what was lacking in the existing literature were accounts on body-politic responses to national scale crises which could have detrimental legitimacy implications if mishandled. This thesis is thus trying to fill this gap.

This question should not be neglected because normal politics and crisis politics are intrinsically linked to the understanding of the nature of a particular regime.

Normal politics and crisis politics are mutually explicable. On the one hand, the former largely conditions the environment in which the latter operates. On the other hand, the latter is a condensed and accelerated form of the former. More importantly, crisis politics provides us with a distinct and rare angle through which we are able to uncover the inherent strengths and weaknesses of that particular regime, which are often unnoticed in the day to day business of its normal politics. This is particularly the case for China. It should be admitted that the study of Chinese politics has been made easier by the increased availability of open information as well as the possibility to gain limited access to various aspects of the establishment. However, it remains unclear how the driving forces of policy making compete with one another or how decisions are made at the top echelons of the CCP leadership. A crisis provides such an opportunity in that the ‘black box’ is partially unveiled by the (sometimes unintentional) release of often contradictory information in relation to an emergency that is otherwise kept behind closed doors. The Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen incident were both of this nature.

Furthermore, crisis in Chinese politics has another scholarly significance, and this can be understood from the perspective of regime legitimacy. According to established wisdom, the CCP’s tripartite sources of legitimacy are performance, nationalism and stability (Holbig and Gilley, 2010; Shue, 2004; Weatherley, 2006)³. While these are largely findings from China’s normal politics, they are also to a large extent applicable in relation to crisis. The situation of crisis provides a site for the confluence of the three sources of legitimacy. Performance is embodied by the government’s responsiveness and professionalism of crisis management whilst nationalism is often the dominant theme when

³ Certainly, there are many more sources of legitimacy that are being discussed in the scholarly community. I only choose the three most frequently cited ones. See these publications for a more comprehensive discussion on legitimacy in China.

the Party rallies the people behind itself during crises. In particular, scholarly discussion on stability as a vital source of CCP legitimacy has a natural fit with the stability discourse constructed by the Party itself to justify its continued rule in light of popular anxiety about possible chaos triggered by intense socio-economic challenges (Sandby-Thomas, 2011). According to this discourse, stability is provided by the CCP at two levels, both of which are closely related to crisis. On one level, the CCP has presented itself as a reliable stabiliser when the country navigates through tough transformation or even uncharted waters. As the CCP itself today still assumes most responsibility for initiating any reforms in China (Zheng, 2010), its self-bestowed stabiliser role means that it will only try to perfect the system incrementally and in a risk averse fashion rather than implementing radical, ‘shock therapy’ style reforms that former communist countries in Eastern Europe have implemented. In this sense, the CCP justifies its continued rule on the basis of its prudence to *avoid* economic and social crises as occurred in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s. On another level, the CCP has presented itself as the ultimate guarantor of order in case crises do occur (in the form of external shocks, such as natural disasters), safeguarding personal safety and individual wellbeing of the people. In this sense, the CCP justifies its continued rule and ubiquitous presence in the society on the widely held assumption that only a centralised Party–state with a strong big government is able to quickly bring situations under control when the nation is faced with adversities. Stability is thus provided in the form of care and assurance that the Party conveys to the masses during crises. In these situations the Party becomes a very visible actor, as the saviour of the people and the defender of their (human) security. As such, being able to provide stability in crises is particularly important for Party legitimacy, given the fact that the CCP is still the dominant actor in crisis management (more dominant over other societal forces than in normal politics) and that nowadays the Chinese society is so divisive

such that almost every major crisis could potentially become a point of contest between social classes with incompatible goals⁴.

In this respect, crisis creates the situation wherein various legitimization claims as found in normal politics can be tested further. It can even be suggested that in such an already risk-averse society as China, outstanding crisis management capacity alone may have stood out as the fourth, and previously understated pillar of regime legitimacy.

For a generation of China scholars, the abovementioned significance of crisis in relation to the defining nature and legitimization claims in Chinese politics was well appreciated. They took advantage of the rich availability of information during crises to illuminate the broader picture. For a time, studying Chinese politics through the enquiry of crisis was a popular approach used by a number of scholars (Zheng and Lye, 2004), with the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen incident being the most studied cases. However, this tradition has largely discontinued as a result of the pluralisation of China studies since the 1980s, in which the research focus has shifted away from the CCP (Zheng, 2010). This thesis seeks to pick up this tradition by studying recent major crises in an attempt to update our understanding of Chinese politics.

Recent crises after 2003 such as those chosen for case studies (the SARS epidemic, the Sichuan earthquake and the Sanlu milk scandal) are worth investigating because they are qualitatively different from older crises studied by a previous generation of China scholars. This is because the defining context of Chinese politics has changed beyond recognition since 1989, and this new context has had a profound influence on how recent crises were bred and unfolded. For instance, the exclusive focus on economic growth is now regarded as problematic whereas in the Deng era it was regarded as imperative; the

⁴ One recent such divisive event was the Anti-Japanese protest in September 2012, in which people from underprivileged background took to the street and destroyed Japanese-related properties en route of the demonstration. Many of these properties belonged to the middle class, whom were offended by such a xenophobic fever.

advent of the Internet and other decentralised means of communication has largely made the state's hierarchal control of information counterproductive; the state of rule by law has actually deteriorated in recent years contrary to the expectation that once established it would improve in a linear fashion; further fragmentation in the authoritarian establishment has given rise to the pluralisation of policy making but also led to a difficult trade off between consensus and efficiency; the 'intermestic' factor has become increasingly prominent when managing domestic crises. These five thematic contexts will be thoroughly explored in Chapter 3.

Unfortunately, scholarly publications on recent crises are in short supply in spite of their political importance and analytical richness. Most studies speaking directly to the topic tend to appear in edited collections. These volumes all have limitations despite all of them offering valuable insights into this crucial topic and are helpful to this thesis. *The SARS Epidemic: Challenges to China's Crisis Management* (Wong and Zheng, 2004) offers a comprehensive analysis of this first major challenge facing the Hu-Wen leadership. Its strength and shortcoming both lie in it being a multidisciplinary study. It is rich in terms of perspectives but at the same time each contributor to the volume has a narrow focus on his/her own specialism. For example, inadequate healthcare provision, ambiguous laws regarding new infectious disease and the incoming leadership as the agent of change, could have been integrated into a broader picture of a paradigmatic shift brought about by SARS, but these interconnected issues are addressed respectively in three individual chapters. *Chinese National Security Decisionmaking under Stress* (Scobell and Wortzel, 2005) is strong on analysing aspects of decision making such as consensus building and information processing, and in particular the role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Nonetheless, both the analytical framework and case studies used are about political-military crises, types of threats that are affecting China far less frequently than

NTS threats. Also, due to its state-centric perspective and stress on traditional security, the societal sphere which is rising in importance in shaping crisis management outcomes, is largely underplayed in this volume. *China's Crisis Management* (Chung, 2011) has the most comprehensive coverage of crises, ranging from economic to environmental crisis, from traditional security threat crisis to NTS crisis. This volume does well in highlighting the adaptability of Chinese crisis management – the tendency of more capacity building and professionalism is clearly conveyed throughout the book. Nevertheless, the diversity of the types of crisis studied makes it difficult to adopt a generalised model or draw a comparison, both of which are absent from this book.

1.4 Contribution

In light of the shortcomings with the existing literature, this thesis will contribute to the study of China's crisis management in three distinctive ways.

First, most previous studies implemented different analytical and disciplinary perspectives for different types of crisis, making it difficult to determine China's crisis behaviour in general. Drawing on western literature on the political utility of crisis and adapting it to the Chinese context, the author constructs a generalised model of crisis management under the CCP. This model is capable of explaining how the CCP derives political utility in its favour through manipulating different types of crisis. The model is applicable to crises such as epidemics, natural and man-made disasters, as will be shown in the case studies. It can also be useful in analysing economic crisis, social unrest and technological disasters, as will be shown in the conclusion. In short, this model reveals the previously understudied 'standard operating procedure' of the CCP's crisis management.

Second, for most previous studies that approached China's crisis management from the perspectives of public administration and public management, there was a general lack of political analysis. Taking a page from 'mainstream' theories of crisis and models of crisis management, such as the crisis life cycle, the theory of complexity, the normal accident theory and even the human/natural causation of crisis dichotomy, these studies have enhanced the intellectual capacity building in the subject matter and have done well in capturing the professionalisation tendency of China's crisis management in terms of tactical preparedness and response. However, these theories and models are mostly derived from western public administration and organisational studies assuming political neutrality or even an apolitical nature in the policy implementation process, which when transplanted to China, overlooks the fact that China's political context is too powerful to ignore. This is well manifested in the periodic resurgence of the old reflex that offsets or U-turns the progress made on transparency and openness. This thesis will therefore bring politics back into the analysis. The author will explain the consistency and inconsistency as found in China's crisis management behaviour by situating the topic within the broader political context. In so doing, this thesis will uncover whether the authoritarian nature of China's political system is an advantage or an impediment to effective crisis management.

Last, scholarly publications on recent crises are in short supply. This thesis will therefore update the empirical knowledge base on crisis management in China. It offers critical and detailed analysis on the three most challenging crises in the Hu Jintao era; SARS, the Sichuan earthquake and the Sanlu milk scandal. It will also mention a host of other crises in the run up to the 18th Party Congress (PC) convened in 2012. Furthermore, a systematic comparison of recent crises will be presented in the conclusion, a crucial dimension determining the sustainability of the CCP style crisis management which none of the previous studies has offered.

1.5 Hypothesis

The CCP has managed to sustain its political hegemony to date through the manipulation of crises and through maximum tinkering with the current political system.

The CCP runs a country that is ‘perpetually in the throes of crises’ (Scobell and Wortzel, 2005:1). The country’s diverse geographic and demographic features, complex and decentralised governance, economic and social conditions under intense transformation and increasing connectedness with the outside world, all breed formidable challenges in the form of numerous natural disasters and man-made crises. Yet the CCP has been able to navigate through crisis after crisis without significantly reforming the political system. The secret lies in its adept ability of defusing crises through political manipulation.

In democratic systems, crisis merely constitutes a crisis *in* the system, because crisis can often be displaced via the change of the ruling party and the government. In authoritarian systems, crisis often leads to a crisis *of* the system, because the possibility of changing either the ruling party or the government, does not exist. However, the CCP has developed and refined a sophisticated alternative crisis displacement mechanism. This mechanism displaces and manipulates crisis in three interlinking phases, these are:

- (a) Construct an official and hegemonic crisis discourse to shift the dominating paradigm, which highlights CCP rule is making progress;
- (b) Centralise political power and shake up the Party-state apparatus; demonstrate limited accountability while reinforcing Party control over local governments and society;
- (c) Reconnect with the people to show Party benevolence; reinforce the popular perception that the central government is more legitimate than local governments.

In manipulating crises through this tripartite mechanism, the CCP has so far displaced and defused all major crises with general albeit uneven success. In the course of managing crises, the CCP has also reasserted itself and maintained its standing as the overwhelmingly dominant actor in Chinese politics.

This hypothesis leads to three main research questions reoccurring throughout this thesis. These questions will be answered in the conclusion.

- 1) How well has the CCP managed crises so far?
- 2) What are the most important factors that condition the efficacy of the CCP's crisis management?
- 3) Are the same strategies of crisis manipulation sustainable enough for the CCP to manage future crises?

1.6 Research Methodology

This thesis mainly employs three qualitative research methods: case studies, documentary analysis and interviews.

I. Case Studies

This thesis uses detailed case studies to test the validity of the analytical framework the author establishes in Chapter 2. As this framework is largely drawn from western literature on the political utility of crisis which is underpinned also by examples from the west, the author needs to take caution when adapting this framework to the Chinese context. As a result, the author does not simply transplant the analytical framework, but devotes half of Chapter 2 to identifying some distinctive Chinese attitudes and cultural inclinations and

integrates them into the mainstream (western) conception. Nonetheless, the explanatory power of this adapted framework cannot be taken for granted unless proved by real crises in China. In addition, the case study approach will allow the author to integrate different types of data generated from documentary analysis and interviews.

Three case studies are chosen for this thesis: the 2003 SARS epidemic, the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and the 2008 Sanlu milk scandal. On the surface, these are natural disease, natural disaster and man-made contamination respectively. They are three seemingly different types of crisis if we only look at their external causation. However, the three crises are not only comparable, but are indeed common. They are all governance crises with a combination of exogenous and endogenous causation. And crucially, it was mostly the endogenous causation that determined the extent and distribution of disaster impact in these crises. In SARS, it was the opaque information dissemination and the lack of cooperation between civilian and military health authorities that elevated a local outbreak into a global pandemic. In the Sichuan earthquake, it was the poor enforcement of building codes that led to the collapse of school buildings killing many school children. In the milk scandal, it was the symbiotic relationship between the government and large businesses that resulted in a regulatory gap in food safety. In short, it was the endogenous causation of the poor standard of governance *ex-ante* crises that provided the common link between the three cases.

Furthermore, the three crises all became political crises in China's authoritarian context. Without the possibility of changing the government, whenever evidence emerged that poor *ex-ante* governance execrated disaster impact *ex-post*, criticism from the public often went beyond government competence but questioned how the system was put together and why it should continue in this way after many similar blunders. Therefore, the

three crises selected are entirely comparable in terms of their similar implications for regime legitimacy. Chapter 2 will discuss this in more details.

In addition, the three crises occurred between 2002 and 2008. For the earthquake and the milk scandal, their political fallout was not completely settled until 2011. We therefore have three case studies that span a timeframe covering almost the entire Hu era. During this period, the case studies cover the entire trajectory of crisis behaviour under Hu: 2002-3 (SARS) for the newly inaugurated leadership, 2008 (the earthquake and the milk scandal) for the consolidate leadership and from 2010 onwards (the fallout of the earthquake and the milk scandal) for the outgoing leadership. This will help us discern elements of change over time and determine their relationship with high politics, thus making wider generalisations possible.

II. Documentary Analysis

Research for this thesis used extensive documentary analysis of primary and secondary data. For primary data, this thesis consulted numerous official statements, briefs for important Party meetings, leadership speeches and departmental specific policy documents to gain a better understanding of Party discourse, especially discourse on crisis, given the importance of slogans and rhetoric in initiating political campaigns in China. As part of an ongoing effort to improve transparency after SARS, an increasing amount of government open information has been made available on the Internet. The thesis benefited from this transparency measure in terms of factual accuracy. The author mainly cites Xinhua and the People's Daily (People's Net), the two most important Party mouthpieces, for official information.

For secondary data, in addition to consulting reputable scholarly works in English, the author made extensive use of materials in Chinese, thus enhanced the originality of this research. The Chinese journal database, CNKI (Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure), was used intensively throughout the research process, providing a rich resource base beyond a sole reliance on English language material. Apart from consulting paper based secondary information, the author also visited the Universities Service Centre for China Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong which maintained a large archive of multimedia resources on Chinese political events, including western and Chinese made documentaries on contemporary crises. These multimedia resources all benefited the thesis given the importance of narrative and perception in the study of crisis.

III. Interviews

The author used interviews as a complementary research method to documentary analysis. At present, decision making in China's 'high politics' remains opaque despite more transparency at the bureaucratic politics level. Interviews with well-informed individuals on their perceptions about this area thus provided unique and vital resources that at least compensated the lack of open information. During the author's field research in China in 2010, a total of 57 face to face interviews were conducted. Those chosen as interviewees consisted of professors in the PRC academic system with different degrees of access to the policy circle, retired government officials previously involved in the making of key policies and representatives of international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) in China who keep regular contact with the Chinese government. Due to the still sensitive nature of the topic, the details of all respondents are kept confidential. A semi-structured and open-ended question format was used during the interviews as this was the way

respondents preferred when talking about a sensitive issue. And with semi-structured and open-ended interviews, the author could get as much information from as many perspectives as possible.

1.7 Outline of Research

This thesis is comprised of seven chapters. The introduction lays the background for this research by surveying the state of the field, and identifies gaps in the existing literature which this research is going to fill. It also sets out the hypothesis and research questions that are reoccurring throughout the thesis. The rest of this thesis is structured as follows.

Chapter 2 establishes an analytical framework regarding the political utility of crisis, which will be applied throughout the thesis. In this chapter, examples from the west as well as from China are used to support the argument that, as crises are not so much objective conditions as subjective judgements, they can often be manipulated for someone and for some purposes. This chapter thus provides the analytical underpinning for the CCP's crisis manipulation through which it seeks to reinforce its control over state and society. Chapter 3 offers a critical analysis on the Chinese political context and its path dependency, alongside the explanation of how this broader context will benefit or undermine the efficacy of the CCP's crisis management. The discussion is arranged according to themes, namely the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) centred political economy, state control of information, state-society relations, policy making and international pressure. This chapter thus sketches the situational limits for the analytical framework established in Chapter 2.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are case studies that serve to validate the applicability of the analytical framework and its situational limits as set out in previous chapters. The finding is that, the CCP has managed to address all three crises with general albeit uneven success. In the course of managing these crises, the CCP has also reasserted itself and maintained the political status quo.

The concluding chapter is devoted to making further generalisations through a comparison of crises. As this is an evolving research topic, the sustainability of the CCP's current crisis management regime is discussed with reference to more recent crises. Possible directions for future research are also suggested at the end.

Chapter 2: Conceptualising Chinese Crisis

Management

2.1 Introduction

This chapter constructs an analytical framework for the thesis. As the thesis argues that the CCP has reasserted itself through the skilful interpretation and manipulation of crises, and managed to sustain the political system with maximum tinkering, we need first of all to look at exactly what a crisis is and how it can be utilised politically. In order to strengthen the argument, the author seeks to explain that the politicisation of crisis is commonplace in all polities, and it is not something narrowly applicable to China or the CCP in particular. The author then situates this argument within the Chinese context and tries to identify some distinctive attitudes and cultural inclinations that do exist in addition to the mainstream (western) understanding of crisis. This structure outlines the analytical foundation for the case studies in later chapters.

The chapter begins with a reassessment of the meaning(s) of crisis in academic settings by clarifying what quantitative and qualitative attributes constitute a crisis situation. It also explains how to classify crises and the advantages and shortcomings of existing crisis typologies. Then the author argues that crisis is not only an objective condition but also a subjective judgement. Exactly what a crisis is depends on the experience and perception of crisis participants: therefore one's crisis could well be another's opportunity (Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1997). Inferred from this, crisis offers maximum opportunities for the active display of agency and thus can be conveniently utilised for political purposes.

To misquote Robert Cox who famously argues that ‘Theory is always for someone and for some purpose’ (Cox, 1981:128), the author argues that crisis is always for someone and for some purpose. Crisis has three types of political utility: The first type is to facilitate a ‘decisive intervention’ so as to shift the dominating paradigm (Hay, 1996a; 1999a; 1999b). The second type is to enable the centralisation of political power and alter power relations within the state apparatus in favour of the central state vis-à-vis its subordinating agencies (Thornton, 2009), as well as redefining state-society relations. The last type, which is also where the greatest temptation for leaders to stir a crisis lies, is the relative autonomy between the promoted crisis and the concealed, real intention. Put another way, political leaders can often articulate and label particular social problems or issues as a crisis in order to enlist the temporal unity among the public and advance other purposes which only have a weak link with the constructed crisis.

The latter part of this chapter will apply the above theme to the Chinese context with an emphasis on the perceptual distinctiveness. After briefly reviewing the role of crisis mentality in ancient China, the author suggests that Chinese history since the beginning of the ‘century of humiliation’ has been characterised by the simulation, stimulation, or even fabrication of crisis as an integral part of the statecraft. Examples from both the Republic of China (ROC) and the PRC eras are given. The last section suggests that despite the Party’s insistence on harmony, there has been, and there will remain, continuity on the strategic invocation of crisis, and periodic crisis-induced mobilisation will continue for some time as one of the powerful tools in the CCP’s arsenal of governance strategies to tackle formidable challenges.

2.2 What is a Crisis?

Crisis is an important concept in political studies but the word is often used without much caution to its meaning. Its frequent appearances in the media, alongside the discursive usage of the term to depict the perceived accumulation of irresolvable contradictions, have made it a generic and eye-catching - rather than a specialist term. According to conventional wisdom, any situation of urgency, instability or even uncertainty can be labelled a crisis. As a result, crisis is too ambiguous to define rigorously. However, such over-usage of the term can make both analytical and practical research on crisis problematic. Conceptions of political and institutional change differ significantly according to varying levels of fluctuation and the intensity of transformation. Only revolutionary changes or events that have the potential to bring about revolutionary changes can be conceptualised as periods of crisis in terms of political time (Hay, 2002), whereas many 'crises', as perceived by non-specialists, are only evolutionary in nature. In practice, the categorisation of modest incidents as crises may distract the already scarce crisis management resource that should be deployed to deal with real emergencies. For the sake of the argument on crisis and crisis management, it is important first to clarify what quantitative and qualitative characteristics constitute a genuine crisis.

2.2.1 Crisis as an Objective Condition

I. Quantitative Attributes

For an incident to qualify as a crisis, the seriousness of the threat has to cross a certain threshold. This can sometimes be measured by quantitative parameters. First, quantitative indicators about damage are widely used. For example, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has a warning system to alert the world about the severity of a flu pandemic. That

is, as the number of infections and the number of countries being affected rise, the alert level will be raised accordingly. Once the virus is continually spreading amongst people in several continents and regions, the WHO will declare a pandemic and raise the alert level to the highest phase 6, in which case a worldwide public health crisis is confirmed (DirectgovUK, 2009). Similarly, quantitative parameters can be the number of casualties or the value of property loss, and these numerical measurements of cost are particularly applicable in assessing the extent of damage caused by natural disasters (Gov.cn, 2006).

In addition, crises differ from prolonged troubles in that the former are critical junctures that demand rapid responses and decisions, after which decisions can only be made under less favourable circumstances (Billings et al, 1980), whilst the latter can be muddled through under less time pressure. The time pressure with regard to a crisis can also be quantified and is measurable. For instance, in the aftermath of an earthquake, it is internationally agreed that the first 72 hours are critical, after which most survivors under the ruins are less likely to survive without food and water. This is the reason why the sense of urgency during the first 72 hours dictates shorter decision time and quicker response than other (prolonged) imperatives (e.g. reconstruction), which are generally not regarded as crises and are dealt with using more routine solutions.

A third, plausible, quantitative attribute of a crisis is the probability of its impending occurrence. Even when the value of possible loss is high, it is less of a crisis unless it is highly likely to happen. Although this attribute involves a lot of (objective) scientific calculations, it is worth noting that the process (by which the resultant decisions are derived from the probability) cannot be free from intervention from the parties involved. The most typical example is the earthquake prediction. On the one hand, the cost of evacuation and relocation is extremely high and such cost prediction is relatively easy to calculate. On the other hand, we are not able to predict the probability of earthquakes with

the same degree of confidence given the current state of geological or seismological expertise. Very few successful predictions have been made so far. As a result, earthquake predictions are intertwined with the competition of political, economic and social interests and priorities. Subjectivity in both the process and the outcome of earthquake predictions should not be neglected.

Numerical indicators of damage, the measurable time pressure and the probability of adversity are not meant to be an exhaustive list of all the quantitative variables associated with a crisis, but they are most commonly seen in national and international governmental contingency plans. Once an incident possesses one or more of these quantitative traits, it is likely to be recognised as a crisis by the government and necessary responses will be triggered automatically. The inextricable role of governments in these situations implies that these (objective) quantitative measurements are not free from subjective perception, a topic I will turn to below. However, it is fair to argue that even objective conditions have to be above a minimum threshold in order to be perceived as a crisis.

II. Qualitative Attributes

Although definitions of crisis are multifarious, common qualitative attributes can still be identified among different studies. Hermann's proposed crisis definition features three elements: high levels of threat, short deadlines for decision making and elements of surprise (Hermann, 1972). These three characteristics, I argue, are broad enough to encompass all qualitative attributes that a crisis possesses because subsequent works on crisis definition are more or less evolved from Hermann's. The high threat dimension is largely undisputed. Regarding response time, Brecher (1977) refines the temporal

dimension of Hermann's definition by replacing 'short time' with 'finite time', considering the gap between available time and the deadline for a decision. The only problematic dimension is surprise, for which Hermann himself found little empirical backing (Hermann, 1972). Nevertheless, the uncertainty about a crisis in a broader sense - in other words, the unexpectedness unpreparedness or situational instability relating to a crisis, can find resonance in the crisis literature from different perspectives. Once again, a caveat should be declared here: these qualitative attributes are not entirely independent from subjective intervention.

In sum, crisis can be regarded as an objective condition or 'property of a system' (Hay, 1999b:323), as manifested in the above quantitative and qualitative attributes. Nonetheless, as argued above, purely objective crises hardly exist. These objective conditions are only the necessary but insufficient conditions for a crisis in a political sense. For Hay, these objective conditions - i.e. the 'unacknowledged accumulation' or 'condensation of contradictions' - constitutes a 'failure' vis-à-vis crisis (Hay, 1999b). Failure is the purified version of crisis, independent of any subjective perception.

2.2.2 Typologies of Crisis

The above is about what crises have in common. But what makes crises different from one another? The typologies of crisis should be reviewed in order to answer this query. The most convenient and common typology is the natural-human causation dichotomy. With such a dichotomy, it is easier to identify the 'fundamental influence possibilities' of a crisis (Gundel, 2005:107). According to conventional wisdom, natural catastrophes, by literal implication, are acts of God and beyond human control. The hazard is therefore almost unstoppable. Man-made disasters, on the other hand, are consequences of human action. It

is worth noting here a further dichotomy within the subset of human causation crises - i.e. man-made vs. social crises, or normal vs. intentional accidents. According to Perrow, the operations of any organisations which depend on sophisticated technology are persistently at risk because potential breakdown is embedded in any technological system (Perrow, 1984). Normal accidents are the result of system-overload in these ill-structured technological systems. Conversely, intentional accidents are acts of deliberate malevolence conducted by human beings - for example, the terror attacks of 9/11.

The natural-human causation dichotomy has very different implications on my below discussion of crisis management, mainly because of the responsibility attribution. Being beyond the control of human beings, natural forces give an acceptable excuse for the unpreparedness and slow response of those who are held responsible, whereas man-made disasters are more likely to expose human and organisational faults (Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1993).

However, such a dichotomy is not as clear-cut as it might appear at first sight. It is argued that ‘there is nothing “natural” about “natural disasters”’ (Wisner et al, 1976), since for a natural disaster the hazard and its consequences should be analysed separately (Wisner, 2003). It is fair to argue that the hazard is driven by natural forces but its consequences are not necessarily so, a point we will return to below with more discussion. Nevertheless, government authorities in general and authoritarian governments in particular favour the crisis typology based on the natural-human causation dichotomy. Natural disasters are extraordinary public events which reveal existing sources of governmental failure by putting the disastrous consequences of such failure under the spotlight. But, by labelling a disaster as ‘natural’ and ascribing major responsibility to factors ‘beyond’ human control, i.e. by confounding the consequences of the hazard with the hazard itself, it is apparently much more convenient to explain away governance

deficits and developmental failures. In China, this typology is deep-seated even without government manipulation, since in the Chinese language natural disasters (*tianzai*) are explicitly distinguished from man-made disasters (*renhuo*). However, the CCP takes this a step further by propagating a sharp contrast between the sympathy of the Party and the brutality of the nature, and thus shows its benevolence to the people. In the aftermath of disasters, slogans such as ‘disasters have no mercy, but the people do, and the Party does’ (*tianzai wuqing, ren youqing, dang youqing*) are run as part of the disaster relief propaganda campaign⁵. The natural-human causation dichotomy best serves the CCP’s goal of convincing the people of its crisis management credentials – the Party is not only technically competent but also morally benevolent in times of crisis.

Similarly, government authorities are also inclined to explain away their responsibility associated with above-mentioned normal and intentional accidents – they just happen as a result of various unfortunate exogenous factors, be they faults with the machinery (industrial accidents) or with the infrastructure. For example, after the Sichuan earthquake, it was explained by the authorities that schools were ‘more likely to collapse’ than other buildings because ‘classrooms are big spaces where the number of pillars built to support their structures has to be fewer’ (China Economic Weekly, 2009). Similar accidents can also be ascribed to the crime of the individual with ulterior motives (in the Fanglin School explosion, officials said the school was blown up by a ‘madman’) (Lianhe Zaobao, 2001)⁶, but not the fault of the government. Independent investigations in all these cases indicated that the government had regulatory nonfeasance to say the very least, but a crisis typology that distinguishes only between natural disasters, technological disasters

⁵ Just search *dang youqing* in Chinese (the Party has mercy) on Google for numerous illustrations.

⁶ The Fanglin School in Jiangxi province exploded on 6 March 2001 when pupils were manufacturing fireworks in the classroom. The incident killed more than 40. The local government covered up the real cause of the explosion and claimed it was a criminal case where the school was blown up by a madman. Premier Zhu Rongji initially cited this misinformation at a press conference but he had to apologise several days later when the story and the real cause became internationally known.

and deliberate evil actions covers up much of the government failure, and indeed provides the government with plenty of room for the manipulation of the real causations of these crises.

In addition to the flaws in the responsibility attribution with the crisis typology based on the natural-human causation dichotomy, this typology cannot keep up with the pace of historical and technological change. Historical change has brought about an expansion of the variety of situations that are considered crises. The above deep-seated typology is facing increasing controversy owing to its inability to distinguish between multiple causations of modern crises, which come as ongoing processes (Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1993). One disaster can be simultaneously featured by two or even three causations. For example, the Chernobyl incident would be conveniently classified as a man-made technological accident if the explosion is viewed in isolation. But if viewed as a series of incidents, i.e. the disaster plus its aftermath, Chernobyl clearly had natural (environmental degradation caused by nuclear radiation), social (information deception) and transnational dimensions. For a more complex example of the climate change, human beings are both the victims and the offenders of this 'natural' crisis. In addition, technological progress – for example, the widespread use of satellite technology and early warning systems - has facilitated the estimation and prevention of crisis, rendering the 'hitherto absolute factors such as the speed of onset into relative and partially controllable ones' (Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1997:281). In short, the natural-human causation dichotomy is losing relevance.

Crisis scholars therefore have been working on alternative typologies that would clearly differentiate all past, present and future crises of different natures into mutually exclusive subsets. Gundel classifies crises according to their predictability and possibility of influence before and especially during their occurrences. Such a typology spans the

chasm between natural and man-made crises and allows for the allocation of future crises (Gundel, 2005). But this typology is not without flaws. For instance, it does not sufficiently take into account the difference in information availability *ex-post* and *ex-ante* a crisis (Gephart, 1984).

Rosenthal and Kouzmin (1993) propose a more specialised division based on the apparent properties of crisis, ranging from business crises, (near-) nuclear crises and oil spills to terrorism, riots and crowd disasters. This typology is better at grouping crises of similar characteristics, but the number of subsets may go beyond a manageable amount if future crises of new types are to be included, such as the misuse of gene technology or planetary collision. The same authors later introduce a new typology which distinguishes between endogenous and exogenous crises, as well as between ‘conflict’ and ‘solidarity’ crises (Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1997). The former distinction concerns the origin of crisis whereas the latter is concerned with the level of consensus among all beholders of the crisis. For a solidarity crisis, all crisis participants agree on a particular crisis response strategy when facing a common external threat such as a factory fire. When divergence over a particular crisis response strategy prevails, a conflict crisis takes shape – for example, a strike in the same factory. One interesting case that should not be omitted is about natural disasters. More often than not, natural disasters are regarded as solidarity crises in their initial phase. However, as more people become aware of how the disaster response is going to affect their wellbeing individually, there is a greater risk that the initial consensus might break, giving rise to a conflictual crisis instead.

2.2.3 Regime Types and the Limitation of Crisis Typologies

The above development in crisis typology certainly helps us to identify common traits of different crises: in this way, it facilitates ‘the deduction of consolidated findings about

crises and auxiliary countermeasures' (Gundel, 2005:106). However, when the ruling government under consideration is a non-elected, authoritarian government, the applicability of a clear-cut crisis typology is limited. The variety of old and new crisis typologies previously discussed seem to downplay, to different extents the role of the government and governance, as well as focusing disproportionately on *ex-post* responses as opposed to *ex-ante* planning and mitigation. Certainly, in democratically elected systems this is a less salient issue because if a ruling government is deemed incompetent, it can be replaced by a new one via an election (or at least the incumbent government faces the potential risk of being replaced so that it does not dare to govern too badly). Once the government is deemed incompetent and is changed, governance problems attached to it are also off the agenda, leaving few burdens for the next government. For authoritarian governments which intend to rule indefinitely, however, the mechanism of crisis displacement via change of governments featuring democratic systems does not exist. The same issue of *ex-ante* governance is therefore more salient, and its salience often gradually aggravates after the immediate aftermath of a crisis when people's attention shifts from sympathy to accountability. For example, in handling the Sichuan earthquake, the government's high degree of responsiveness won domestic and international endorsements. However, as soon as the large scale, life-saving relief effort had finished, governance issues with the poor enforcement of building standards and official corruption surfaced and undermined support for the government. In a survey, respondents' support for the government increased in the immediate aftermath of the quake, but dropped below average when more negative coverage concerning (non) governance emerged (Landry and Stockmann, 2009).

In addition, this trajectory of varying public opinion was also evident in the SARS crisis and the Sanlu milk scandal. It suggests that from the grass-roots perspective, there is

a similarity between the three apparently dissimilar cases. Indeed, from the administrative science perspective, the three crises have to be dealt with by ‘fire-fighters’ from disaster relief, healthcare and law enforcement agencies respectively, each deploying its departmental-specific measures. But the reason for the detrimental consequences in the three crises was a common one: that was, the poor standard of governance which resulted in the accumulation of so many unresolved problems *before* the crises. Before the SARS crisis, the poor governance of the dissemination of information, and the lack of accountability, emboldened officials who were lying ‘not only to the people but also to each other’ (Breslin, 2008a:22). Before the Sichuan earthquake, poor governance and regulation of the construction industry as well as poor enforcement of building standards, emboldened developers who were skimping on materials and who were cutting corners to make profits. Before the Sanlu milk scandal, the poor governance of food safety emboldened profiteers who were contaminating milk powder with melamine. In the latter two cases, poor local governance and the lack of monitoring of local officials by superior governments also emboldened local officials who were colluding with profiteers or who were complicit in cheating and corruption. In fact, it was the fundamental issue of *ex-ante* governance that provided the common link between the three cases.

Equally importantly, issues of *ex-ante* governance in terms of mitigating and limiting the consequence of crisis were entrenched in the three crises under investigation. As discussed above, modern technologies have enabled mankind to bring even natural forces under partial control (e.g. weather control), let alone mitigate the adverse impact of disasters through conscious planning and preparation. To mitigate the consequences of an earthquake, for instance, buildings should be designed to be as earthquake-proof as possible in places that are more earthquake-prone than other locations. To prevent a

moderate infectious disease from becoming a pandemic, there need to be designated specialist hospitals prepared to admit people with infectious diseases at any time.

To prevent a local product safety issue from becoming a transnational scandal, an effective recall mechanism needs to be established and enforced. What is most important is that whether the government has taken all reasonable precautionary measures either to avoid the escalation of a crisis, or to limit its consequences. In light of this, it is the day to day governance standard that lies at the heart of the problem, rather than just the governance of crises and their case-specific, auxiliary countermeasures.

From a broader perspective, even the choice of development strategies has implications on crises. Development and risk reduction go hand in hand because ‘disasters are rooted in development failures’ (DFID, 2005). This was exactly the case for our three cases under examination. The SARS crisis and the Sichuan earthquake exposed the strikingly unequal distribution of quality infrastructure and healthcare resources across regions. The milk scandal reminded us never to stimulate materialist wealth at the expense of spiritual and moral collapse. All three crises reflected that the growth model, which prioritised economic growth but was biased against social and human development, was not sustainable. These failures were as damaging as (non-) governance failures, but they were the result of the government’s policy preferences rather than its direct nonfeasance. And, as these policy preferences have a popular root because a huge number of average citizens have benefited from them, the risk associated with these policy preferences is hard to mitigate.

It is very natural that failures, especially failures which are amplified through crises and disasters, will lead to contestation of regime legitimacy. As argued above, elected democratic systems are in a more enviable position in the blame game than non-elected authoritarian systems after a comparable crisis. This advantage can also be explained in

terms of the contestation of legitimacy. This is not to suggest that democratic systems are blame free in times of crisis. On the contrary, the censure is often fierce; however, responsibility attribution in most cases does not go beyond the resignation of senior leaders or a significant reshuffle of the ruling government. The legitimacy of the political system is not only unharmed, but to some extent enhanced because the stepping down of incompetent officials has verified the seriousness of the democratic accountability system. In extreme cases, the responsibility attribution involves the change of the ruling party and the government, but the legitimacy of the democratic regime is still undisputed. In contrast, in authoritarian systems, whenever a future crisis is upcoming – no matter its exact type – the exposure of what the government should do to prepare or mitigate but has not done will trigger the blame and discontent to resurge, recycle and accumulate within the system. Without the safety valve for crisis displacement which characterises democratic systems, authoritarian regimes have very few choices at such critical junctures. They can either resort to whatever resources they have to resolve the crisis, or quell the discontent by force if they are not willing to fall. As such, the legitimacy of authoritarian political systems is ‘hijacked’ by crises. In other words, crises under democratic systems may give rise to crises *in* the system whereas crises under authoritarian systems often lead to crises *of* the system.

To sum up, typologies of crisis are more useful in practical settings than in an analytical sense. An analytical caution should be made when discussing crisis typologies in regard to different types of political systems. For a similar crisis, what presents as a matter of administrative competence in democratic systems may well become a much more serious issue about regime legitimacy in authoritarian systems. Also, to classify crises and attribute responsibility in authoritarian systems, we need to look beyond the apparent

differences between these crises and take a more holistic view that includes more fundamental issues of governance, development and regime legitimacy.

2.2.4 Crisis as a Subjective Judgement

Analytically, crisis as a conception is twofold: objective and subjective. In the objective dimension, crisis is preconditioned upon the existence of a ‘constellation of failures’ (Hay, 1999b). In the subjective dimension, crisis is in the eyes of different parties involved in the crisis situation. A single event can be interpreted in a number of ways and generate different versions of crisis discourse, as the above discussion on different perspectives between the elite and the public regarding the nature of a crisis has demonstrated (though beware that in authoritarian systems the most dominating version of crisis often belongs to the elites, or those with access to the most resources and information). Moreover, someone’s crisis could well be another’s opportunity (Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1997). Individual perceptions of the extent to which a given situation is critical differ substantially in terms of the importance of what is at stake and for whom it is at stake (Swaine, 2006). The stakes concerned can be key interests, core values or moral principles. For example, the Chinese leadership often exhibits a high degree of sensitivity over ‘stability’, and when stability is perceived to be under threat it often deploys the crisis discourse and is very unlikely to back down.

2.2.5 The Mobilisation of Crisis Perception

An individual subjective judgement on crisis has no political significance, but, once aggregated and collectively mobilised so that the crisis perception is widespread and

overwhelming, such perception in its own right can be powerful enough to alter the political trajectory. People with political ambitions all covet this under-tapped resource to make political change, as research shows that the ideas people believe are as important as their self-interest driven motivations in affecting politics and policies (Campbell, 2002). Additionally, mass persuasion is much more cost-effective than monetarily buying off the masses. Here emerges the role that the media play. The media, in democratic and authoritarian regimes alike, often have an overt hand in engineering ideas and cultivating a mass perception of crisis: ‘If the media define a situation as a crisis, it is crisis in its consequences’ (Quarantelli, 1998).

Crisis is therefore a process of social, political and linguistic construction and narration. In some cases, political protagonists ‘define crises depending on their normative and cognitive presuppositions’ (Campbell, 2002:32). Accordingly, different media outlets selectively pick particular contradictions out of a pool of societal contradictions as crisis symptoms. Indeed, these crisis symptoms are only a snapshot of the panoramic societal landscape and are not necessarily an accurate reflection of the principal problems in a given society, but they provide political protagonists with the raw material to challenge the political status quo. In other cases, this process of crisis construction can emerge largely autonomously and in a bottom-up manner – i.e. members of the public pick particular problems concerning them and push them on to the state agenda. Either way, a crisis diagnosis is alive and the media are crucial in mediating the crisis narrative.

In practice, the language of crisis construction needs not to be complex. In fact, the simpler the crisis narrative, the more persuasive it is, because for Wilson, ‘only a very gross substance of concrete conception can make any impression on the minds of the masses; they must get their ideas very absolutely put; and are much readier to receive a half-truth which they can understand than a whole truth which has too many sides to be

seen all at once' (Wilson, 1952:20). As such, 'the only way in which the soul of a great nation can be stirred, is by appealing to its sympathies with a true principle in its unalloyed simplicity' (Wilson, 1952:31). In addition, the narrative that triumphs has to be, first, ambiguous and adapted to a great variety of 'morbid symptoms' whilst 'unambiguous in apportioning blame' (Hay, 1999a:335). Second, it needs to be narrated in a language vague enough so that different portions of the society 'could read different interpretations into it to suit their own interests' (Campbell, 2002:27).

On the receiving end of the media message, a large proportion of the mass audience are unwary of media distortion. They tend to believe what is in the text without sufficient ideological sensibility. For a crisis situation to emerge, it needs to be 'perceived, attended to and evaluated against some standard or measure of how things should be in order for a problem to be sensed' (Billings et al, 1980:302). For a mass audience who may know little about the specificity of each crisis symptom, the knowledge about the discrepancy between normal and abnormal situations could well be derived from their common sense or everyday living experience. This again proves that in order to reinforce cognitively the crisis narrative, the language of the crisis narrative needs to be simple yet vivid, so as to 'find resonance' with people's common sense and 'lived experience' respectively (Hay, 1999b).

Therefore, the mobilisation of crisis perception comprises both the media and audience involvement. It is not just about active indoctrination and passive reception, but is instead a cognitive interactive process. The public are invited to situate themselves within this purposefully framed context of crisis. Once the crisis narrative is convincing enough that it becomes 'part of people's taken-for-granted cognitive schema' (Campbell, 2002:32), the perception of crisis is internalised and mobilised.

2.3 The Political Utility of Crisis

Yet the mobilisation of crisis perception is the means, not the end. During unsettling times or critical junctures such as crisis, the subtle balance between structure and agency often shifts in favour of the latter, which opens up new possibilities for unconventional choices (Streeck and Thelen, 2005). By this token, crisis offers maximum opportunities for the active display of agency and thus can be conveniently utilised for political purposes. Crisis has three types of political utility.

2.3.1 Utility One: Shifting the Dominating Paradigm with Decisive Intervention

The perception of crisis is likely to come hand in hand with popular aspirations for change and a resolute break with the past – only at this time can the political possibilities for paradigm shifts become more favourable (Imershein, 1977). The incompetent ought to be dismissed, the fortress must be stormed and a new departure has to be made. When it comes to the question of crisis resolution, the imperative of decisive intervention or the need to impose a new trajectory upon existing institutions comes very naturally.

As mentioned above, ‘one’s crisis is often another’s opportunity’ (Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1997:285). This critical conjuncture provides maximum opportunities for actors competing for the dominant crisis discourse and response. According to Gramsci, an ideological struggle, i.e. a war of position, will take place out of which a state and hegemonic project will be forged (Gramsci, 1971, cited in Hay, 1996a). The new project that triumphs often belongs to proponents of the most influential crisis discourse, because the underlying contradictories are defined in the most favourable terms to them, upon

which the ‘new’ cures are prescribed. In the words of t’Hart, ‘the most important instrument of crisis management is language. Those who are able to define what the crisis is all about also hold the key to defining the appropriate strategies for [its] resolution’ (t’Hart, 1993:41).

There are numerous examples where politicians define a situation as a crisis so that they may intervene in order to overthrow the dominant paradigm that ‘results in’ the constructed crisis. Most notable is the ‘Winter of Discontent’ of 1978–9 in Britain, in which the ‘New Right’ defined waves of industrial conflict and economic dislocation as a crisis of corporatism (Hay, 1996a). Their crisis narrative succeeded and paved the way for the new, neoliberal paradigm of economic management under Margaret Thatcher. The applicability of Hay’s insights may go beyond democratic politics and explain paradigm shifts in authoritarian systems as well, such as in China. At about the same time as the ‘Winter of Discontent’, Deng Xiaoping utilised the failures of the Cultural Revolution and ascribed these to the then still-dominant Maoist paradigm. In doing so, he thus removed ideological and ideational barriers to the reform and opening paradigm. To a lesser extent, Hu Jintao utilised SARS as a symptom of a crisis with Jiang Zemin’s developmental paradigm that focused almost exclusively on GDP growth. He then introduced the Scientific Development Concept (SDC) as a more sustainable alternative growth model and highlighted this as his contribution to the CCP’s ideology. But, just as utilising crises to shift dominant paradigms in democratic politics is not to alter the democratic regime, in authoritarian systems there is usually a limit to which this strategy can be played out; as such, it is about changing the paradigm *within* the system but not the system *itself*, so the line of anything that undermines one party rule should never be crossed. For example, Deng Xiaoping questioned the legitimacy of the Maoist paradigm but he was much more hesitant to question the legitimacy of Mao Zedong as the paramount and principal

founding leader, because the latter had been internalised as part of the CCP's regime legitimacy.

Unsurprisingly, as we shall see throughout the thesis, no matter how reformative the new project appears to be, in reality, the resulting changes never occur absolutely and can only be measured in relative terms. For instance, Thatcherism brought about economic paradigm change in the forms of privatisation, restrictions on labour movement and financial liberalisation in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. Similarly, Reaganism injected more elements of neoliberalism into the U.S. economy in the 1980s through tax cuts and curbing welfare expenditure. Nonetheless, few would suggest that as far as the conduct of politics and economic governance are concerned, the reformative state projects of Thatcherism and Reaganism represented sea-changes or resolute breaks from the old paradigms and altered the 'basis of polity in the United Kingdom and the United States' (Breslin, 2008b:215).

The connection between the crisis discourse and the crisis resolution we discussed above implies that the so called 'decisive intervention' is not only targeted at the crisis in essence – i.e. contradictions and failures that are selected to sustain the crisis narrative – but also at the crisis as a phenomenon and 'discursive construction' (Hay, 1999b). It is thus argued that crisis management only aims at defusing crisis rather than solving the basic problems that create it (Swaine, 2005). Hence, any seemingly epoch-making shifts made in the post-crisis era should be treated carefully if they involve both crisis as a phenomenon and crisis in essence. They are perhaps not as different as their proponents assert.

To borrow a metaphor from everyday life, your computer crashes (phenomenon) owing to software errors (contradictions) and you reboot (intervention) the machine to get it working again. Yet the reboot in its own right does not necessarily correct the software failure – it is merely an interim solution in which the original software is simply reloaded

into the system. This temporarily fixes the computer (making a difference) but does not necessarily prevent the computer from crashing again from the same cause. In this case, the intervention (reboot) addresses the phenomenal crisis (system crash) more than the substantive crisis (software errors), and is logically akin to our discussion of the relationship between the ‘decisive’ intervention and the crisis.

2.3.2 Utility Two: The Centralisation of Power and Redefinition of State-society Relations

Given the limitation of any new alternatives imposed upon the state after a crisis, why are ambitious leaders still so keen on crises? Despite having power over the text (i.e. media influence), they have something much greater to gain by making real differences in terms of expanding governmental as well as state power. In the words of Woodrow Wilson, crises have the benefit of bringing forth leadership because they are ‘peculiarly periods of action, in which talents find the widest and the freest scope’ and that great minds enter the arena when offered opportunities for ‘transcendent influence’ (Wilson, 1925:35). As such, extraordinary political mobilisation is often initiated in the name of countering crises. The argument leads us to the discussion on the second political utility of crisis.

Politicians utilise crisis to circumvent ‘normal politics’ and get their way (Thornton, 2009). To be sure, ambitious leaders themselves go to great lengths to stress their unique contribution to a country’s politics in terms of distinctive policies (Breslin, 2008b). However, their efforts to stress distinctions from their predecessors are often met with obstruction which stems from the day to day business of bureaucratic politics, and which reduces the credibility of the leader’s commitment to change. In this sense, the massive state apparatus can be seen as a clumsy machine comprised of many gears with

different sizes performing different functions but lacking lubricant. In its routine operation, the gearing may not be running smoothly and efficiently; that is, if big gears do not engage well with the small ones because of mechanical friction then the entire machine will work at a low level of efficiency. Crisis is to ‘institutional gridlock’ what lubricant is to ‘grinding gears’ (Schulzke, 2005:262).

Policies are more likely to be carried through in dynamic and proactive systems which possess inherent capacity for managed change and organisational learning. In contrast, most modern states can be regarded as inertial and reactive systems because the ‘state’ (as opposed to its complex web of agencies) lacks an inherent unity and the capacity to coordinate centrally (Hay, 1999b). If policies are to be implemented on the ground, the state has to behave as a singular actor and acquire institutional unity, which can only be achieved through the centralisation of state power, usually under the rubric of crisis.

Thus, historical evidence of waves of the centralisation of power followed by crises is not a coincidence. The mobilisation of the prevalent crisis perception eases the centralisation of political power through the injection of the ‘state of emergency’ into the bureaucratic structure. The state of emergency status then narrows the ‘central–field’ gap between political elites and local bureaucratic agents of the state (Boin and Otten, 1996), thus reducing the number of principal-agent relations associated with the policy implementation process. The rising centre of gravity for policy making allows central authorities to bypass traditional participants in the decision making process, avoiding the scrutiny to which their actions are normally subjected, and circumventing established procedures and the inter-agency bargaining in the bureaucracy that prevails in normal politics (Rosenthal, 1988). On the part of officialdom, the rubric of crisis significantly reduces their bargaining power relative to the central authority, in that the disciplining effect of crisis justifies any radical pushes for change in policies – the promotion of the

Social Darwinism conception of only the adaptable surviving and the need to adjust or die (Breslin, 2010). As such, a real or constructed crisis has the potential to redefine the power sharing balance in favour of the central vis-a-vis local authorities, channelling towards the centre a commanding authority and undisputed leadership.

Central authorities overtly utilise this favourable power balance that emerges out of the crisis to shake up the political system and to discipline local subordinates. For example, in the SARS crisis and the Sichuan earthquake, the CCP's disciplinary and organisational departments regarded these crises as moments of major tests of Party cadres. According to the performance of cadres during crises, the Party promoted some model Party cadres but dismissed many more incompetent cadres. Similarly, the administrative branch cleaned the house after the milk scandal. In fact, the CCP's limited (norm based rather than formal rule based) accountability system was largely born of crises.

The mobilisation of the prevalent perception of crisis not only changes the power relations within the state apparatus itself, but also has important consequences on state-society relations by redefining the contours of politics. Amid the sweeping crisis perception, the public aspiring to change would 'require' a decisive leadership. The generous attitudes granted to the much needed leadership then pave the way for large scale concerted actions, which seem to be imperative and inevitable if the intertwined daily affairs among individuals and nations are to be transcended and common interests preserved (Schulzke, 2005). More often than not, concerted efforts by the state would slide into the subtle private sphere. For instance, in the SARS crisis, neighbourhood committees in Beijing were mobilised to patrol their own communities and report those with suspicious SARS symptoms, who could then be subjected to mandatory quarantine or isolation (Zhang, 2006).

Nevertheless, the invocation of these mandatory collective actions at the expense of private interests is morally justified, because for Hegel:

The internal dynamic of civil society presses each individual and corporate interest to concentrate exclusively on itself and to forget its dependence upon the whole ... But the threat of external enemies ... draws particular interests together in awareness of their membership in the state, and it teaches that sacrifice for the whole is a condition of both membership and individuality. (Hegel, cited in Connolly, 1988:124)

Hence, by stirring a crisis, the leadership is granted the best opportunity to restructure the body politic. The boundaries between the public and the private, the state and the civil society, as well as between the government and the market, could all be subject to redefinition through the attendant intervention in the crisis.

2.3.3 Utility Three: Utilising Crisis to Bolster Legitimacy

The greatest temptation for leaders to stir a crisis lies in the relative autonomy between crisis and politics, cause and effect, as well as the ‘tenuous relationship between triggering events and the policy preferences of national leaders at particular historical junctures’ (Thornton, 2009:25). Put another way, political leaders can often articulate and label particular social problems or issues as crises to elicit temporal unity among the public, and thus advance other purposes which only have a weak link with the constructed crisis. If this ‘crisis strategy’ is utilised for legitimate purposes, it can be justified as the art of unifying politics to foreclose distractions. Crisis hence becomes a part of growth during which a common identity is revealed and refined (Schulzke, 2005).

However, crises, real or fabricated ones alike, were often utilised for controversial purposes. This could even happen in a democratic context. One well-known example was

the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which was waged in the name of eliminating the impending threats posed by Iraq's possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). It was a part of the so called 'war on terror', which could have been highly contested domestically and difficult to justify without the pervasive perception of crisis among the American public. Through the manipulation of fear which peaked after 9/11, George W. Bush transformed his previously controversial presidency into a strong one supported by sweeping patriotism, whereas convincing evidence on WMDs was never found. Similarly, the French intervention in the Mali crisis in January 2013 was a good example. The French President, François Hollande, who had been widely perceived as a weak and inexperienced leader since his assumption of office, utilised the Malian insurgency as a situation justifying military intervention in which he temporarily transformed his image into a decisive and competent wartime leader. The intervention made him highly popular in Mali, which also arguably boosted his popularity at home.

In an authoritarian context, the inclination to utilise crises to boost regime legitimacy is more commonplace. For example, consecutive paramount leaders in North Korea have been adept at precipitating international crises for regime consolidation, from Kim Il Sung's invasion of South Korea, to Kim Jong-il and now Kim Jong-un's periodic sabre-rattling to raise both their international and domestic profiles. For China, Shirk (2007) argues that the Chinese leadership has created or perhaps in the future will create international crises to divert attention away from domestic problems. Previous examples include the highs and lows in the Sino-Soviet relations and their links with power struggles within the CCP.

2.4 The Conception of Crisis in the Chinese Context and its Political Utility

Generally speaking, the understanding of the word crisis, and its conception by Chinese scholars, is similar to the western understanding at a practical level. Both the quantitative threshold and the qualitative typology methods are widely applied in identifying and categorising crises. They are seen in various emergency response plans devised by the government in recent years.

2.4.1 Crisis Mentality in China

At the linguistic level, definitions of crisis are also similar in English and Chinese languages. Here it is necessary to clarify a common misconception among western and perhaps a few Chinese scholars who point out that the Chinese people are particularly inclined to view crises as opportunities from which they can benefit (Swaine, 2006). This view even resonates with very senior officials, such as Wang Yang, a Politburo member, who once suggested turning a crisis into an opportunity during his visit to a Guangdong city badly hit by the export slump after the 2008 global financial crisis. He urged local officials to regard the crisis as an opportunity for industrial upgrade (Nanfang Daily, 2009). For them, the Chinese word for crisis, *weiji*, is an inseparable combination of the word *wei* (danger) and *ji* (opportunity). This misunderstanding probably originated from and was popularised by John F. Kennedy's speech in 1959, in which he said 'When written in Chinese, the word "crisis" is composed of two characters – one represents danger and one represents opportunity ... Along with danger, crisis is represented by opportunity' (Kennedy, 1959). In fact, the word *ji* does not mean opportunity here; rather, it refers to a

critical juncture according to its contextual meaning in the Chinese language (Mair, 2005). So, for most Chinese people, ‘a crisis is first and foremost a dangerous event that has the potential to produce a range of outcomes, good and bad’ (Swaine, 2006:3).

However, at the perceptual level, some distinctive Chinese attitudes and cultural inclinations with regard to crisis do exist in addition to the mainstream western understanding. For traditional Confucian literati, the crisis mentality was pervasive even in times of peace because it was a moral mandate in their spiritual conception of history. ‘The paradigm of patriotic worrying provides all Chinese intellectuals with the claim to a moral and spiritual significance for their work’ (Davies, 2007:16), because crisis mentality not only connotes but also confers a sense of personal responsibility about the nation’s destiny. It is ‘an autochthonous ethos’ that is deeply rooted in the everyday intellectual life ‘in the widest and most inclusive scope’ (Davies, 2007:16).

This deep-rooted crisis mentality comes about, according to Link, because Chinese intellectuals hold a fierce conviction that China can and should be an exemplary culture and society that other societies should and would follow (Link, 1992). But no society is without its problems and China is no exception. So, the contrast between the ideal and the reality is often sharp. The ‘dark side’ of society is thus regarded as disgraceful by Chinese intellectuals who have a perfectionist tendency. This discrepancy in turn reinforces the conviction that China must do better. And when China is in trouble, it is not difficult to see why Chinese elites are desperately seeking the way out of the darkness. The fact that the guiding principle of China’s development shifts from one totalising philosophy to another that each creates as many problems as it solves also becomes understandable in the context of this perfectionist tendency (Leonard, 2008).

From a more materialist perspective, this crisis mentality has also been traditionally rooted in China’s predominant strategic culture which Johnston classifies as *parabellum*

realism (Johnston, 1995). He argues that the famous Chinese idiom referring to the crisis mentality, ‘*Ju an si wei, you bei wu huan*’, is similar to the realpolitik axiom, ‘*Si pacem, parabellum*’ (Johnston, 1995:107)⁷. Although being criticised for his bias against the Confucian strategic culture, Johnston’s argument is clearly relevant to our analysis of the crisis mentality that shadowed China during the ‘century of humiliation’.

2.4.2 Crisis and Modern China

Since China’s defeat in the First Opium War in 1842, this crisis mentality has been enhanced by the Social Darwinist ideology that only the fittest will survive (Hess, 2010). In the domestic realm, the outmoded political system of Feudalism, inferior productivity and impoverishment were perceived to have contributed to the crisis-ridden state. The crisis mentality was even more evident when it came to the assessment of China’s external environment. Since then, consecutive Chinese leaders have held a typical realpolitik conception of international relations. They believed that states were in the world of anarchy and the law of the jungle prevailed. Crisis was therefore inherent to such a constantly fluid international system, within which the nation-state with the least (relative) power was also the most vulnerable. For them (and the Chinese literati in general), China was extremely crisis-prone given its backwardness. The catchphrases ‘falling behind will be beaten’ and ‘a weak state has no diplomacy’ at that time reflected the extent to which Chinese elites were worrying about the impending threats China was facing. The perception of crisis stimulated reforms that came one after another in the wish to make China strong and competitive: first technological (the Self-strengthening Movement) and then institutional (the Hundred Days’ Reform). Nonetheless, these reforms were either

⁷ Their meanings in English are also not very different: the former means think about danger while in peace, with preparations, there won’t be calamity; the latter means that if you want peace, then prepare for war.

minor tinkering or short-lived as a result of strong opposition from vested interests. Neither reform was able to change China's critical situation, as more defeats in the following years demonstrated.

At this point, the perception of crisis reached new heights as the discourse of China's disintegration by imperialists was gaining influence, paving the way for extraordinary political mobilisation and revolution as the last resort. At the same time, the modern nation-state consciousness began to emerge out of the Chinese society which was stereotyped as lacking unity. As the Hegelian crisis-driven unity suggested, threats from external enemies raised the individual's consciousness of the totality and brought together the destinies of the individual and the totality which were mutually dependent. As such, the political consensus gave priority to national survival and the maintenance of sovereignty was taking shape. The Qing government's humiliating failure to defend China's sovereignty against the imperialists contributed to the awakening of nationalist sentiment, which rallied many to overthrow the Qing Dynasty. After the Xinhai Revolution, the first republic in Chinese history was founded. For some, it was not only a victorious first step in China's state building, but also a victory against the 'foreign' Qing government⁸.

2.4.3 Crisis and Republican China

Since the May Fourth Movement in 1919, nationalism has formally become the latest dimension of crisis mentality. For Link, 'The worrying mentality is, first of all, related to patriotism in the sense that China, one way or another, is always the main object of worry. The entire mentality is couched in a big question "What can we do about China?" (Link, 1992:249). Worries facilitated the New Culture Movement that criticised the backwardness

⁸ The Qing Dynasty was founded by the Manchurian. Because it was a non-Han regime, many in central China, especially intellectuals, regarded it as an alien regime which must be removed.

of various components of Chinese society. Targets ranged from Confucian doctrine to deep-rooted superstition and anything incompatible with modernity and civility. Even language was, under the rhetoric of national crisis, standardised and transformed from an elite to a mass language with the moral purpose of creating a Chinese modernity (Davies, 2007). This period enjoyed much freedom of speech and ideological pluralism – a proliferation of ‘~ism’s (*zhuyi*). To name a few: anarchism, liberalism, utilitarianism, neoconfucianism, three people’s principles, socialism and communism. It was worth noting that ‘~ism’s themselves were constructions that transformed an ideological preference into a set of rational solutions. These ideologies ‘picked and mixed’ symptoms out of the pool of China’s many failures and provided corresponding remedies, missions and visions, as well as competing for influence. The Kuomintang (KMT, Chinese Nationalist Party) with three people’s principles, and the CCP with communism were the two that stood out and each found resonance with different quarters of society. With the two competing fiercely for control of the country, contemporary Chinese history since then has featured the simulation, stimulation, or even fabrication of crisis as an integral part of the statecraft.

Despite their bloody battle, the two parties did hold the country together when the whole nation of China faced crises of a higher degree. They subsumed their respective crisis discourses under the rubric of greater crises when they were confronted with common enemies. The first time they had limited cooperation was during the Northern Expedition against warlords whose rule split China. The second time was the alliance to resist Japanese invasion. But with the defeats of common enemies, the loosely formed alliance began to fall apart, as a result of their sharply contrasted interpretations of China’s principal contradiction.

The KMT's defeat by the Communists in the subsequent civil war lay first and foremost in its problematic military manoeuvre (Oriental Morning Post, 2009), but from the perspective of crisis narrative, their losing was also unsurprising. In the latter phase of the civil war, the communists mobilised all means of propaganda, intensively disseminating the message of a holistic national governance crisis under the KMT. They recruited such discursive crisis symptoms as hyperinflation, stoppages and student demonstrations, indicating through media outlets supported by the CCP that the KMT regime was at the brink of collapse and presented a crisis diagnosis by which different sections of society 'could read different interpretations into it to suit their own interests' (Campbell, 2002:27): everything that happened was owing to the three big mountains of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat-capitalism. Note that this tri-faceted crisis diagnosis was appealing to three sections of society. It resonated with peasants who were struggling with poverty because of the feudalist agrarian relations; it resonated with left-wing students who had been long discontented about imperialism; and it resonated with petty-bourgeoisie or 'national bourgeoisie' who were oppressed by bureaucrat-capitalists. The plain and vivid language they used in comparison with that of the KMT helped the CCP's crisis diagnosis take root, too. Moreover, the communists held the key to crisis resolution by presenting themselves as a democratic, nationalist and socialist party (the complete opposite to the three diagnoses aforementioned). Regardless of the CCP's record after 1949, its skilful crisis narrative did enlist popular support for change, in both rural and urban regions. In stark contrast, the KMT's version of crisis was impotent as a result of poor rhetoric. In fact, Chiang Kai-shek in 1948 declared a de facto state of emergency according to 'The Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of Communist Rebellion'. The Provisions, aimed at war mobilisation on a national scale, overrode the Constitution which was passed just four months previously, and granted the President

substantial discretionary, extra-constitutional power (Chiu, 1994), as well as allowing the President to be exempt from the two terms limit. This was a poorly narrated version of crisis because it recruited no substantive content apart from denouncing the Communists as ‘rebels’, let alone the impression that this was no less than Chiang’s move from authoritarianism to totalitarianism. Not surprisingly, the average citizen did not perceive the crisis in the same way that the KMT did. When Chiang flew to Chongqing to command the defence of his last stronghold on the mainland, his aide found that the life of people there ‘looked as normal, not much different from the time of peace’ (Oriental Morning Post, 2009).

2.4.4 Crisis and the Early PRC Era

Since the CCP took control over China, the political utility of the perception of crisis has remained important. The relationship between the perception of crisis and the survival of the Chinese state is actually well embodied in the lyrics of the national anthem of the PRC:

Arise, ye who refuse to be slaves;
With our very flesh and blood,
Let us build our new Great Wall!
The peoples of China are in the most *critical* time,
Everybody must roar his defiance.
Arise! Arise! Arise!
Millions of hearts with one mind,
Brave the enemy’s gunfire,
March on!
Brave the enemy’s gunfire,
March on! March on! March on, on! [my italics]

This song, originally named the March of the Volunteers, was a battle song composed in the 1930s when the fate of the nation reached a point where its very existence was at stake. It stimulated Chinese soldiers who rose wave upon wave to fight the Japanese

invaders (China.org.cn, 2006). On the eve of the PRC's founding, when being asked for opinions about the national anthem for the New China, Mao disagreed with some delegates who proposed changing the line 'The peoples of China are in the most *critical* time', since all major enemies were defeated, so the emphasis on looming threats was 'outdated'. Mao contended that the original lyrics should remain unchanged so as to awaken the people to a mentality of vigilance in times of peace. He further elaborated that the mentality of crisis should not be abandoned, since 'imperialists and counterrevolutionaries are still surrounding us, a threat we may well face even in the future; economic backwardness also means danger' (The PLA August First Film Studio, 1992). Here, crisis was perpetuated and given new meaning other than wars which was broad enough to encompass discursive difficulties.

Moreover, there has been continuity of the strategic invocation of crises, and crisis-induced mobilisation has become a mode of governance for tackling challenges. This is parallel to the CCP's efforts in perpetuating its revolutionary tradition and the spirit of struggle. When it came to wars in the early PRC era, for example, during the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea (the Korean War) of 1950-1953, crisis discourses were created to justify austerity and to rally the people behind the Party-state, while domestic mass campaigns were initiated concurrently to purge elements disobedient to the new regime. For times of peace after the early 1950s, the CCP's crisis strategy shifted inwards to the social engineering of 'controlled polarisation'; that is, 'creating coalition with, and cleavage among, key social elements as a means of encouraging popular political participation' in order to bolster the CCP's political hegemony (Perry, 2007). And for such a strategy to work effectively, a variety of social contradictions were identified (again, through careful selection) and reinterpreted as critical situations in need of the CCP's intervention and direction. Thanks to the CCP's monopoly on the dissemination of

information (i.e. the transmission belt), the task of cultivating a crisis mentality as needed was made much easier because it created only the official crisis narrative that dominated public perception. In addition, the cultivation of crisis perception is not an entirely top-down process, for it also involves mass input. For instance, ‘grasping typical cases and spreading the experience gained at selected units to the whole country’ (a popular practice reflecting the essence of the Maoist mass line: ‘from the masses, to the masses’) and ‘forming a consensus after studying the instructions’. With these inputs, official doctrines are more likely to be internalised and help turn the Party’s intent into the people’s voluntary actions (Wang, 2008).

Successive CCP leaderships have been adept at ‘crisis engineering’ and ‘controlled polarisation’. Chairman Mao was the master of such a strategy. The Three-anti and Five-anti Campaigns, the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution were crises that were deliberately stirred or fabricated by the Great Helmsman in order to achieve his utopian ideal. He utilised crises as developmental strategies because he viewed chaos as progressive development: ‘It seems as if where things were really chaotic, that’s where they’re really better. We’ve been at it for decades, and that’s our experience’ (Schoenhals, 1999:597).

2.4.5 Crisis and Post-Mao China

Although Deng Xiaoping’s reign was much less turbulent, he inherited the Maoist legacy of ‘controlled polarisation’ as soon as he came back to power. The economic crisis as he depicted it, and his numerous urges to modernise the economy so as to catch up with other industrialised countries, were a moderate version of Mao’s motivation for launching the Great Leap Forward. In addition, the launch of the big discussion on the standard of truth and the following thoughts liberation were his manoeuvre to provide the masses with a

‘storyboard’ which gave the whole nation the sense of an ideological crisis in need of his intervention. This manoeuvre soon shifted the ideological debate in favour of his pragmatism and isolated the ‘whateverists’⁹ – hardcore Maoist followers under the patronage of Hua Guofeng, Mao’s chosen successor (Weatherley, 2006; White, 1983). Without Deng’s ideational triumph in casting Maoism in a negative light desperately in need of change, the replacement of the Maoist paradigm with a Dengist one would have come much later. During the 1980s, Deng also initiated or supported waves of ideological and economic relaxation or contraction.

For the generations of leaders without revolutionary prestige since Jiang Zemin, the Party’s revolutionary legacies have still been retained and practised. Jiang was familiar with the strategy of divide and rule, most notably demonstrated by his harsh suppression of the Falungong, in which he deployed a divisive revolutionary rhetoric by branding this ‘evil cult’ as ‘counter-revolutionary’ (Perry, 2007) (and he turned this struggle into an antagonistic one – this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3). For the reform in State Owned Enterprises (SOE) starting in 1997 which he oversaw, his government also managed to discursively narrate a looming but abstract threat of ‘globalisation and global competition’ (and their adverse impact) on SOEs in addition to the SOEs’ own crisis of profitability and efficiency. This skilful framing certainly helped to form a consensus on the imperative of such reforms and facilitated their implementation amid opposition.

Hu Jintao constructed his own image as a populist leader, so it was entirely understandable that the conduct of politics under him involved Maoist tactics of mass participation. He and his colleagues explicitly used the Maoist term of ‘people’s war’ on

⁹ The term referred to Party leaders who maintained the ‘Two Whatevers’ thesis initially pronounced by Hua Guofeng: ‘Whatever policy Chairman Mao decided upon, we shall resolutely defend; whatever directives Chairman Mao issued, we shall steadfastly obey’. As Mao’s designated successor but who was a relatively young leader among other CCP veterans, Hua utilised this slogan in an attempt to consolidate his position as the new leader. However, when it came to economic policies, it was debatable as to whether Hua was still a hardcore Maoist, as a number of pragmatic policies were made under him, including the decision to establish Special Economic Zones.

two occasions: one was the battle waged against SARS, and the other was the mass mobilisation to safeguard the Beijing Olympics that involved hundreds of thousands of citizens (Xinhua, 2003c; 2008s). He also initiated a number of high profile mobilisations for the purposes of studying Party directives, tackling corruption and rescuing victims in natural disasters. At the fourth plenum of the 16th Central Committee in 2004, a resolution aiming at consolidating the Party's diminishing governing capacity was passed. The resolution used dire warnings such as 'fighting corruption is a matter of life and death for the Party' in order to exhort cadres to maintain a sense not only of vigilance but also of urgency about the looming threats to the Party (Breslin, 2008a:14; Thornton, 2009).

Careful readers may infer from the experience of more than six decades since the founding of the PRC that crises, no matter whether constructed or real (or in most cases, mixed), have been in one way or another serving well the goal of sustaining one party rule. Especially since the Deng period, when Party control in various spheres started eroding, periodic crises mobilisations have reasserted the Party itself and sustained the current political system with maximum tinkering. It has become routine that after the resolving of every crisis, the Party reinforces the message that the current system is superior and should be sustained. Furthermore, there is a close fit between reinforcing such a message and the CCP's increasing confidence in the Chinese model: one party rule, strong state and 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. For example, Hu Jintao's speech at an assembly to honour the model cadres in the Sichuan earthquake relief reads:

The superiority of our socialist system, the good qualities of the Chinese nation, the politically distinctive character of the people's army and the firm leadership of the CCP, are the predominant political advantages of our country and nation which we must always treasure and maintain. (Xinhua, 2008ad)

2.4.6 Crisis and the Future of Chinese Politics

The current leadership seems to want to go beyond the instrumental utility of the perception of crisis, and tries actively to instil a sense of revolutionary continuity among cadres and the people alike (Perry, 2007). This is because the Party is increasingly inclined to tap its legitimacy from the 1949 victory (as the symbolic reappearance of the ‘Long live Mao Zedong Thoughts’ at the PRC’s 60th anniversary parade might have suggested) since it is the Party’s only major achievement that has not been widely disputed. Being seen as revolutionary and populist not only will increase the Party’s popularity amid serious social divisions, but will also retain the strength and the spirit of ‘plain living and hard struggle’ that is much needed in meeting the many more challenges that lie ahead.

Many misinterpreted the Central Committee’s adoption of Hu’s programme for building a socialist harmonious society as the Party’s farewell to revolution because the term looked more Confucian than Marxist. In fact, a closer look at the text of the resolution might suggest otherwise. The resolution has not dispensed with the dire problems and revolutionary rhetoric that usually appear in Party documents. Most noticeable is its inclusion of ‘cracking down on the infiltration, subversion and sabotage by hostile forces and ensuring China’s political, economic, cultural and informational security’ as one crucial task for building a harmonious society (Xinhua, 2006). As such, we can be almost certain that some of the revolutionary-era practices will be retained. Furthermore, building a harmonious society should be understood as ‘constructing a state of harmony through the harmonising of contradictions besetting society’ (Hsiung, 2009:40), an enormous task which again requires the vigilance of all. And, on a moment’s reflection, all complex social and political systems are contradictory no matter how advanced they have become. So, the revolutionary legacies of crisis engineering and crisis mobilisation – which are good at

resolving contradictions in the short term – will continue for some time as one of the powerful tools in the CCP’s arsenal of governance strategies to tackle intractable problems.

Chapter 3: Contextualising Chinese Crisis

Management

3.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter looked at the political utility of crisis as found in various parts of the world – in authoritarian but also democratic political systems. To a large extent, this phenomenon of crisis being tailored as means towards political ends is universal. Nonetheless, the eventual political output of such crisis politicisation still differs, depending on the nature of the political system. Arguably, the politicisation or manipulation of crisis has more chance of success in authoritarian political systems, mainly because political elites in these systems are not bounded by checks and balances to the same degree as in liberal democracies. For instance, authoritarian regimes typically tightly control the flow of information, a condition that greatly facilitates the domination of official discourses or rhetoric on crisis. Subsequently, extra-institutional measures and mass mobilisation ‘demanded’ by such crisis narratives more often than not reshape state-society relations in favour of authoritarian regimes. In contrast, liberal democracies inherently possess features which constrain the manipulation of crisis. There are often competing crisis discourses that have evolved around the same problems, which inevitably weaken the legitimacy of the state’s decisive intervention. Moreover, liberal democracies are far less monolithic than authoritarian systems. The separation of powers effectively prevents the manipulation of a crisis going to great lengths, and under these institutional arrangements the slide of governmental power into the private sphere is never easy, even in the name of countering a crisis. All in all, the political context under which crisis

manipulation occurs matters most to what the state can do during a crisis or whether its objectives will be achieved.

3.2 Bringing Politics Back in

The above discussion on the ‘authoritarian advantage’ of crisis manipulation certainly applies to China (and China has its distinct characteristics in addition to these authoritarian advantages in general). That said, the boundary and content of crisis manipulation in China mainly hinges on China’s distinct political context. Surprisingly, as mentioned in the Introduction, the crucial importance of contextualising crisis management in China has been largely ignored by the existing literature on the topic. In other words, a political studies perspective on the subject is missing.

This problem is particularly prominent in the Chinese literature on China’s crisis management, largely because of the way Chinese academia approaches the new subject of crisis management. One important task which the Chinese academia and policy circle have been doing on modernising crisis management is the importation of modern crisis management theories and practices from other countries, especially from the West (Lv et al, 2012). These efforts have contributed substantially to administrative improvements in Chinese crisis management in recent years, especially in terms of intellectual capacity building. Nonetheless, policy advice derived from these studies is often at odds with China’s political realities, which render these remedies impractical. For instance, echoing western scholars who believe in the advantage of decentralised crisis management over centralised solutions, Zhong (2009) argues that local governments should do much more when it comes to crisis management. But, as we will see in almost all recent crises, the

central Party-state has invariably played a pivotal role. Similarly, imported western theories highlight an open approach to crisis management in which civil society plays a significant role, whereas for Chinese crises in recent years we have seen either a short-lived civic effervescence, or the absence of civil society. Mismatches between transplanted experience and local context are precisely attributed to the fact that China's authoritarian political system does not possess various institutional attributes as found in liberal democracies. The study of China's crisis management would only scratch the surface unless these disparities were taken into account.

At a deeper level, academic inclinations that centres Chinese crisis management on the disciplines of public administration, public management or even management science is itself questionable. More than a hundred years ago, Woodrow Wilson (1887) argued in his famous article 'The Study of Administration' that 'administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics' because the latter often manipulates the former. This tradition is followed by Chinese scholars whose subject of enquiry is a Party-state system where administration and politics are highly blended and inseparable. Indeed, the public administration approach has enhanced the professionalisation of China's crisis management in one way or another. For example, between 2003 and 2009, China formulated 106 contingency plans at the national level, established crisis management centres in the State Council, in all provinces and in most cities and counties, and enacted more than 60 laws and regulations on crisis management (Zhong, 2009).

However, the improvement of crisis management has not been linear, as reflected in a mixed record on crisis response, where we often find that these new rules and mechanisms are not strictly adhered to, with old reflexes periodically offsetting improvements on transparency and openness. This back-and-forth is most evident in media control and in the state's tolerance of civic participation. In addition, we can think about an interesting

question: when a disaster occurs, why do top Party leaders have to immediately rush to the disaster scene to monitor local relief efforts? Aren't the above administrative, institutional and legal measures meant to activate automatically a prompt local response without needing the top leadership to intervene personally? It may be fair to say that the professionalism of crisis management improved the preparedness for responding to crises. However, contextualising crisis management is even more important, because it is not so much the level of professionalism or specialism of crisis management as the broader political context that determines the ultimate outcome of crisis management.

One prominent context left unexplained by the administrative perspective is the pivotal role of the CCP. As we have argued in the preceding chapter (and will demonstrate below in case studies), China's response to crises is far from depoliticised. It demands substantial political skill and calculation. The Party (as opposed to the government) dominates every stage of crisis response, from defining to resolving and to playing it down in its aftermath. Remember, in the Chinese context, those essential and powerful apparatuses in the political system closely related to crisis management – such as the Propaganda Department, the Organisational Department, the Discipline Inspection Commission and the Politics & Law Commission – are all controlled by the Party rather than the government. Moreover, the PLA is indubitably subordinated to the CCP and strictly not to the government, according to the current political setting¹⁰. On the other hand, the government is largely directed and overseen by the Party, and only deals with the 'public administration' aspect of crisis management. In other words, the government to a large extent steps back to the position of a pure, policy implementer.

¹⁰ In fact, the government, i.e. the State Council, faced severe difficulty in trying to command the PLA for disaster relief purposes before the PRC Law for National Defence Mobilisation was enacted in 2010. Despite this, the PLA has consistently reiterated that it firmly rejects the idea of civilian control of the military and argues instead that the PLA only listens to the Party.

A political context unique to China, like the one outlined above, is too pervasive to ignore. It is therefore important to re-evaluate the limitations of the administrative science perspective and to reconsider seriously a better analytical framework which incorporates the political context that prevents the benefits of administrative reform from fully materialising.

This chapter is going to deconstruct the Chinese political context into five broad dimensions. They are: (a) the GDP centred political economy; (b) state control of information; (c) state-society relations; (d) policy making; and (e) international pressure. The selection of these is by no means exhaustive or complete. Nevertheless, they are the most important backdrops against which the CCP manages the three major crises under investigation. Just as Albala-Bertrand (1993) finds in a comparative study that pre-crisis conditions shape the post-crisis outcome, similarly, in China, the five dimensions are chosen because they are inherently rich in contradictions and largely pre-determine how crises originate and unfold in particular ways, and how likely it is that crises of the same nature will recur. As much of the development in these realms are path dependent, a brief account of the historical evolution of these since the founding of the PRC will be included when necessary.

3.3 The GDP Centred Political Economy

3.3.1 Legitimizing Crises and the Emergence of Performance Legitimacy

The government's preoccupation with promoting GDP growth rates, or GDPism (Breslin, 2011:150), to a large extent engendered all three crises in question. This single-minded

preoccupation was itself the result of two legitimating crises, one in 1978 and the other in 1989.

The CCP leadership in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution faced tremendous challenges, both political and economic. Popular disillusion with Maoist utopianism and social upheaval put the Party's legitimacy to the test (Baum, 1991; Goodman, 1994). The economic situation was even worse, such that Hua Guofeng, Mao's designated successor, described it as 'on the brink of collapse' (Hua, 1978). Thanks to the prevalent perception of crisis at the time, Deng Xiaoping was able to rise to prominence and to make a paradigm shift, the process of which amounted to the Chinese version of TINA¹¹. The CCP then shifted its focus onto economic construction, and managed to reconstruct its legitimating base on improving the population's living standards via economic modernisation. This shift may be regarded as the nascent form of performance-based legitimacy for the CCP.

The 1989 Tiananmen crisis perhaps taught a hard lesson to the CCP leadership about performance legitimacy – after all, the crisis first originated from mounting discontent with high inflation and a flawed price reform (Naughton, 2007). The hard lesson was that once good economic performance was deemed to bring about legitimacy, the government had to do whatever it took to keep this momentum in order to meet people's rising expectations. It was an intrinsically unstable base for legitimacy, because even the most capable government could not constantly deliver concrete promises that were ratcheting up (Davies, 1962; White, 1986; Zhao, 2009). But, without a genuine will for substantive political and institutional reforms, the CCP was left with very few choices, and looked more and more to the economy as the last, life-saving straw (Weatherley, 2006). This economic imperative seemed very pressing when communist regimes fell one after another

¹¹ There is no alternative, often abbreviated as TINA, was a slogan used by former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who claimed after the Winter of Discontent of 1978-79, that corporatism would not bring Britain any hope and thus economic liberalism was the only viable choice for the country. In the Chinese context around the same time, the meaning of TINA was of course much more modest in terms of economic and political liberalisation.

in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe while during the same period China's economic growth fell from double digit figures to only 3-4% after Tiananmen (UNData, 2012). The palpable vulnerable mentality among the CCP leadership was heightened such that Deng Xiaoping, who then no longer held any formal titles, had to intervene personally and alert his comrades that '[If we] do not develop the economy or improve people's living, it will be a dead end' (Xinhua, 2009a).

Deng's tour in south China in 1992 reinvigorated China's reform and opening, and the economy recovered almost immediately (Wong and Zheng, 2001). Since then, economic performance has become an ever more important pillar of Party legitimacy¹². At the same time, there were new additions to the Party discourse which served to support this performance-based paradigm. Among others: 'Development is the core principle' explicitly revealed an implicit social contract in which the people would not demand political liberalisation so long as the CCP continued to offer them material and social benefits (Tong, 2011); 'Stability above all' dictated that any challenge to the political status quo or disruption to the economy, rightfully or wrongfully, must be quelled in no time; 'Prioritise efficiency while considering equality' indicated a clear preference towards the accumulation over (re)distribution of wealth.

This new rhetoric had profound implications on crisis and crisis management that should not be overlooked. Economic developmentalism went to an extreme, such that it confounded development as a means and development as an end, and resulted in the government's neglect of social development and the environment, which undermined both social cohesion and resilience in times of crisis¹³. The emphasis on apparent stability and the status quo resulted in many cases of information cover up and misreporting during

¹² The other widely agreed legitimating pillars are nationalism and stability, see discussion in the introduction.

¹³ The single-minded pursuit of economic progress based on neither ideological nor moral principles tended to favour individualistic pragmatism, or 'every man for himself', which hindered societal collective response to crises.

crises, and the rhetoric of stability was ill-utilised as a catch-all excuse by local authorities to suppress challenges against their self-interest. Worst of all, the preoccupation with efficiency paved the way for the dismantling of the socialist welfare state, which at the time was regarded as a troublesome legacy of the plan era and thus as inefficient. The subsequent marketisation of previous state welfare provisions triggered the end of socialist egalitarianism and made people extremely vulnerable against hazards, both in terms of financial means and social support.

3.3.2 The Consolidation of Performance Legitimacy and Decentralised GDPism

While the above rhetoric accelerated the fading of the remaining socialist tinge of economic development, it was the 1994 Tax Sharing Reform that reduced the already non-ideological notion of economic development to GDPism. Under this new institutional arrangement, the division of spending assignments among central and local governments was restructured, as were the central-local fiscal incentives. Since then, the central government has been mainly responsible for spending on national infrastructure investment and national defence. Local governments have been mainly responsible for spending on social services (Wong, 2009; Zhao and Lim, 2010). With this expenditure pattern in mind, in essence, China's day to day governance and administration has become much more decentralised. In other words, the quality of such governance and administration in terms of local public goods provision has become largely dependent on the abundance of local government coffers.

Local governments – especially in less developed provinces – soon found it financially pressing to meet multifarious spending obligations that directly affect individuals' living

standards. Nevertheless, local governments as skilful policy entrepreneurs which often incorporated their own interests into enforcing central policy (Mertha, 2009) managed to handle the budget problem through pragmatically utilising the Tax Sharing System.

Under this system, local governments were allowed to keep in-house most of the tax revenue contributed by local firms. This fiscal arrangement gave local governments huge incentives to increase the size of the local economy, measured by GDP growth¹⁴, but with little concern for the quality and sustainability of such growth. As China's door opened wider to international capital since 1992, one of the key measures and shortcuts to boosting GDP growth used by local governments was attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)¹⁵; in a way, it was not particularly different to other less developed countries in terms of the race to the bottom on FDI competition. This pro-FDI policy resulted in deteriorating labour standards and caused many industrial-related crises. The environmental crisis was also severe. In 2011, China's annual economic loss as a result of environmental degradation was estimated to account for as much as 6% of the GDP in the same year, whereas in 2004 this figure was only 3% (Financial Times, 2012b). It is no exaggeration that the single-minded GDPism created as many problems as it was supposed to solve. Critics to GDPism referred to superficial economic gain under this development model as 'blood-soaked GDP'.

Decentralised GDPism also reshaped the specific central-local, fiscal relation regarding crisis management, and to some extent widened the regional gap in terms of crisis management capacity. Before 1994, most of the disaster relief funding was allocated by the central government. For example, from 1983 to 1994, 85% of the disaster relief funding in Anhui province was provided by the central government, whereas only 15%

¹⁴ From the central government's point of view, the tax sharing reform also stimulated China's GDP as a whole by allowing some degree of local autonomy and encouraging competition among provinces.

¹⁵ And similarly, during the 2008 global financial crisis when FDI was not easily attainable and when western demand shrunk, local governments had to shift from export orientation focused to competition on attracting investment from the central government and giant SOEs, in order to sustain local GDP growth.

was provided by Anhui itself (Sun, 2004:192). Under the Tax Sharing System, local governments were required to shoulder an increasing proportion of crisis management funding on their own. But with prevalent GDPism, this important area of public interest was underfunded owing to low incentives from local governments, since spending on crisis management capacity would not directly contribute to growth figures. As a result, crucial disaster prevention facilities such as seismological observatories in some remote areas could not even maintain normal operations (Chen, 2012). Whilst underfunding on disaster mitigation was a national phenomenon, well-off provinces were in a better position to handle crises than less well-off provinces, which were even more financially stretched to focus on GDP and keep public services running, let alone managing crises effectively. For these regions, underfunding on crisis management was worsened by the GDP imperative, which in turn exacerbated the vulnerability to crisis.

The Tax Sharing System was partly designed to address such inter-regional imbalances (not just in crisis management) through transfer payments to poorer provinces from the central government, which now had more fiscal resources to dispense. Nonetheless, this intention was only partially attained in terms of improving crisis management in these provinces. Indeed, the Tax Sharing System strengthened the extractive capacity of the central state to a great extent, financially enabled it to launch national-scale rescue efforts or mobilisations in an all-out manner, as we shall see in our three cases¹⁶. But this advantage, or the ‘superiority of socialism reflected in its strength in achieving great enterprises through centralisation’, as it often appeared in the official Party discourse (Xinhua, 2008ad), could only become apparent after a crisis had already occurred. This was owing to the preoccupation with GDP whilst overlooking crisis mitigation, and for a long time China adopted an approach featuring ‘stress [ex post] crisis

¹⁶ In fact, the first major crisis after the tax sharing reform in which the central government started to flex its formidable fiscal capacity was the 1998 flood in central and northeast China. The government also explicitly attributed this enhanced crisis management capacity to the reform and opening since 1978.

management, overlook [ex ante] crisis mitigation' (Lei et al, 2005:56). In reality, the central government only poured large amounts of resources into a poor region when a crisis had already resulted in severe consequences.

For better or worse, the Tax Sharing System and decentralised GDPism shaped the cycle of Chinese crisis management. That was, crises emerged as a result of local dysfunctioning political economies, and the central government rushed to handle these crises with whatever resources it had. Later in the thesis, we shall analyse the reason for the central government to intervene in every major crisis in a very top down manner. However, it should first be noted that local governments were also financially dependent on the central government on ex post crisis management, especially in poor and remote regions.

The above crisis cycle with Chinese characteristics was a potentially vicious cycle. On the one hand, it increased the burdens that a non-omnipotent central government had to shoulder, whilst on the other hand it did not guarantee that crises of a similar nature would not emerge locally again. Such discursive crisis management only sought to lessen phenomenally the impact of these crises rather than addressing the root of GDPism. The central government seemed to be aware of the problem and sought to replace – or at least complement GDPism, with less materialistic oriented development paradigms, such as the SDC and 'Harmonious Society', which respectively injected sustainability and justice into the meaning of development. However, their advent has not fundamentally changed GDPism. The explanation to this lied in the design of the CCP's reform era nomenklatura system, or the cadre management system.

3.3.3 GDPism and Cadre Management

Since the inception of reform, meritocracy and technocracy have become important norms in cadre evaluation. Incumbent performance weighed more than anything else in determining the promotion of officials. This norm has been institutionalised with the introduction of a target responsibility system in which targets of a set of important tasks were defined by the superior government as evaluation criteria for officials' mobility. These targets thus induced officials to work hard in areas to which the superior government attached importance (Tsui and Wang, 2004).

The target responsibility system had two features that contributed much to local officials' obsession with GDP growth. First, influenced by the prevalent technocratic culture in the bureaucracy since the 1980s (and perhaps by the legacy of the plan), the set targets were heavily biased towards quantitative measures. These targets gave local officials incentives to focus on tasks that were quantitatively measurable such as GDP growth, so that they could appear to stand out among competitors. However, at the same time it led to officials' lack of interest in important works on which performance could not be quantified or objectively evaluated, such as welfare and environmental protection.

The second feature was that targets for cadre evaluation were divided into hard and soft targets. The former included regime imperatives such as GDP growth and stability, whereas the latter included less mandatory tasks which happened to overlap with abovementioned non-measurable tasks. In practice, hard targets could not be compromised, as failing to achieve these would lead to mandatory administrative punishment or *yipiao foujue*¹⁷. On the other hand, under-performance on soft targets could be effectively compensated by over-performance on hard targets (Shih et al, 2012). This only exacerbated the bias towards GDPism because cadre evaluations by design favoured those with good performance on short-term quantitative results, even if they failed to fulfil soft targets that

¹⁷ It meant that the failing to fulfil one hard target would have a very serious consequence on an official's political career.

were mostly defined qualitatively and weighed less than hard targets in cadre evaluation, but were nonetheless crucial to people's livelihood.

It was therefore apparent that the innovation on the Party ideology and the development philosophy could not guarantee a paradigm shift towards a more inclusive, sustainable and crisis-prepared development. Cadre evaluation specifics, which determined the incentive structure of local officials, have largely remained unchanged following the introduction of the SDC and 'Harmonious Society', as has GDPism (Wu, 2011). Without reforming the guiding philosophy of the nomenklatura system, the vicious circles of GDPism-led crises would continue.

3.3.4 GDPism and Governance Deficits

All in all, performance-based legitimacy, the Tax Sharing System and the preference of the nomenklatura system have kept GDPism locked in. GDPism engendered governance crises and dilemmas. Local governments and officials were caught between developing the economy on the one hand, and handling the side effects of it on the other. Most local governments opted for an exclusive focus on stimulating GDP in the hope that socio-economic dislocations would eventually be overcome as a result of high levels of GDP per capita. A series of governance dysfunctions thus emerged. As we shall see in the case studies, GDPism gave rise to crises in the forms of: (a) covering up epidemics for the fear of GDP growth slowing down (SARS); (b) poor infrastructure in remote areas and overlooking building code enforcements (Sichuan Earthquake); and (c) symbiotic relations between local governments and local enterprises under which GDP was generated at the expense of public health. While these three crises had something in common such that they all became crises of legitimacy in their consequences, it was largely GDPism that

contributed to the escalating of local and generic crises into (inter)national and political crises (or, in the case of the earthquake, amplified the hazards associated with natural disasters).

3.4 State Control of Information

3.4.1 Media Control and the Politicisation of Crisis under Mao

For a long time since the founding of the PRC, state control of information was a powerful instrument in the CCP's arsenal of crisis control. In the Mao era, it could be said that there were no crises if these crises were not reported at all. The Party mouthpiece alone had the ability to conceal a crisis, and the severity of a crisis would mostly depend on the Party propaganda. As the CCP enjoyed a high degree of ideological legitimacy in the Mao era, Party propaganda worked well (in terms of not reporting) such that some of the most devastating disasters in the 20th century were little known until their official declassification decades later. For example, a domino effect of dam bursts following heavy rain in August 1975 in Henan province which claimed at least 200,000 lives was not fully disclosed until 2005 (People's Net, 2005).

The CCP was deeply concerned that once disasters like these were made public, this might give rise to connotations that it was losing the Mandate of Heaven – a traditional Chinese conception of regime legitimacy that Heaven would only bless a legitimate ruler whose conduct was good and moral (Zhao, 2009). In ancient China, connections were drawn between disasters and the emperor's loss of the sacred mandate bestowed from the Heaven, and such beliefs were held among rulers and the ruled alike (Gries and Rosen,

2004; Zhao, 2009). Even in Mao's China, the legacy of such beliefs still existed, especially in the vast countryside where superstition persisted. Thus the CCP feared that disasters would be perceived as a signal, suggesting that its rule was no longer legitimate.

From the CCP's own international perspective at the time, it had plenty of reasons not to disclose its sufferings, as it believed that hostile neighbouring countries, especially Taiwan, might be prompted to take advantage of China's disasters when the PLA was busy handling disaster relief. The CCP also regarded such disasters as tarnishing the PRC's external image, because it deemed excessive narrative about the misery of its people as contradictory to its self-promoted image of an energetic, proud and self-reliant, 'new' China. Another consideration was that once the disaster became internationally known, China would be under international pressure to accept international aid, which it was never prepared to accept because the CCP saw such action as indicative of weak national strength (Chen, 2012).

Even in the event that crises or disasters had to be reported domestically, details of the devastation were rarely mentioned. Instead, reporting was geared towards promoting class struggle and nationalist sentiment that centred upon the inculcation of Maoist doctrine. This form of manipulation was taken to the extreme during the 1970s, to the extent that media Professor Wang Zhong at Fudan University concluded that 'disaster itself is not news, disaster relief is' (Dong et al, 2010).

For the abovementioned dam bursts, state media journalists who wrote reports about the disaster were asked to focus their reports on class struggle and the people's undaunted revolutionary spirit in fighting the flood (Southern Metropolis Daily, 2010). For the 1970 Tonghai Earthquake in Yunnan province, local media only published a short piece four days after the earthquake in which even the exact location of the quake was not mentioned (vaguely described as 'to the south of Kunming'), let alone casualties and damage caused

(China Youth Daily, 2000). Later, state media reports alleged that the revolutionary masses heroically fought the disaster with the guidance of the Mao Zedong Thought, and they refused and returned all aid materials and funds sent from other parts of China, keeping only Mao's writings, portraits and badges which were said to give them emotional support (People's Net, 2008a).

Although Mao's teaching has disappeared in disaster reporting since the reform, some Mao era news practices survived and continued to influence the present day disaster reporting paradigm. One long-lasting tradition was always framing disaster news in a positive light. It was exemplary of how the CCP manipulated a crisis through political reconstruction and linguistic narration. This practice required journalists to highlight government responses such as leadership directives and disaster relief mobilisation, at the same time constructing themes of collectivism and patriotism through writing, and sometimes even making up heroic stories about the people's extraordinary bravery. Such distortion artificially turned a miserable atmosphere into a nationalist fever such that Chinese journalists referred to this type of distortion as 'reporting sad news as if it is happy news' (Wu and Xia, 2010). While in the early years of the PRC such distortive framing was primarily aimed at consolidating the Party's ideological legitimacy, in that heroic disaster relief exemplified that only the CCP could lead the people in claiming victory in the war against nature. This practice has a surprising longevity despite the fact that the CCP's radical revolutionary ideology has been abandoned. Nowadays it has been used mainly as a tactic for the government to shirk responsibility for disasters and incidents, for which it could have done better in ex ante crisis mitigation. The constructed heroic theme is often filled with touching elements that distract people from substantive reflections on the crisis or potential accountability issues associated with it.

3.4.2 Limited Media Liberalisation under Deng

Although the ultimate purpose of information control has always been to preserve one party rule, since the inception of the reform its focus has varied considerably in different leadership eras in accordance with legitimating priorities in that era¹⁸. In the early Deng era, the control of information was loosened temporarily to serve the thought liberation from Maoist dogma and to help construct the image of a more legal-rational based and accountable Party leadership that was different from Mao (Weatherley, 2006). The PRC's first report of a crisis with a good degree of objectivity was therefore released shortly after Deng rose to prominence. In July 1980, the People's Daily disclosed that eight months ago the Bohai No.2, an oil-drilling ship, sank owing to negligence, killing 72 workers on board. This report then triggered a series of criticisms and reflections, culminating in the removal of the Oil Minister and a serious demerit for Kang Shi'en, Vice Premier in charge of the oil industry – all of which constituted unprecedented accountability measures in the PRC's history (News Front, 1980).

In the 1980s, limited political liberalisation was accompanied by the increasing availability of alternative sources of information to the Chinese society. People's emerging consciousness of the right to information and right to know contributed to the growing popularity of western radios such as the BBC and the VOA, especially when something bad happened but state media kept silent. This situation forced the propaganda department to abandon its old approach of a complete information blackout and it injected some reformative elements commensurate with China's open gesture at the time (Zhao, 1998). For example, the central propaganda department in 1987 issued a directive which required

¹⁸ Sources or pillars of legitimacy on which each leadership built to highlight their distinctiveness from previous leaderships, examples of legitimating priorities included legal-rational reform, economic performance, nationalism and stability.

state media to report ahead of foreign media on incidents and emergencies that had the potential to attract international attention. Even critical comments were permitted so as to increase the reports' authenticity (People's Net, 2007b). This measure had a more positive effect than its initial intention of establishing and consolidating Chinese state media's credibility in the international community and in the face of competition from foreign media, because the same messages would eventually reach the domestic audience and therefore improve the Chinese people's access to information. This was in line with the CCP's renewed state-society relations discourse set out at the 13th PC: 'major issues should be made known to the people; major questions should be discussed with the people before being resolved' (Zhao, 1987).

3.4.3 Further Media Liberalisation and the Commercialisation of the Media under Jiang

The Tiananmen crackdown brought to a halt this move towards greater transparency. Party theorists and propagandists reflected on why the propaganda apparatus failed to persuade the people – and especially young people – to continue accepting its rule. The critical task was to revitalise the propaganda system so that it remained relevant. There were two dimensions of this reinvigoration project: one was the introduction of an intensive patriotic education campaign into the syllabus, which was later regarded by many as the main boost to the nationalist pillar of regime legitimacy among young people; the other dimension was to renew the contents of propaganda, ensuring stale ideologies were replaced by more materialistic and nationalistic content, reoriented to social and generational change.

Reinvigorating propaganda needed more funding which the old state-funded model could not provide. The goal of making propaganda more appealing also demanded more

decentralisation and press freedom. A programme of propaganda commercialisation and marketisation aimed at meeting both needs was thus launched in the early 1990s, and has hitherto helped maintain the importance of information control as a pivotal means of social control in China (Brady, 2008). Ironically, this market-oriented reform in propaganda and thought work has become largely successful in grafting the seemingly contradicting systems of a market economy under communist rule.

Although the marketisation of propaganda was intended to strengthen the Party's influence over society, economic liberalisation in the media inevitably created more space for press freedom, which bred the innovation, entrepreneurship and (relative) autonomy of media outlets (Zhao, 1998). Running with many fewer or even without state subsidies¹⁹, media outlets (especially tabloid metropolitan newspapers) paid more attention to multifarious problems as a result of the intense socio-economic transformation in order to meet readership interest. Furthermore, owing to profit incentives, the red line on reporting was occasionally crossed. More commonly, sensitive issues were reported according to the strategy of 'hitting line balls' (*da cabianqiu*) (Jirik, 2008:376)²⁰.

The impetus of media commercialisation, along with newly-found media autonomy, soon gave rise to situations in which the media were able to expose the 'dark side' and cracks within the system. Beijing-based central media outlets in particular seemed to stretch their implied political status and checked local governments' abuse of power. Rather than viewing media autonomy as a threat which destabilised the system, the Jiang-Zhu leadership at the time attempted strategically to utilise this media autonomy in order to hold together an increasingly decentralised state. In fact, some degree of instrumental media vocality had not always been to the disadvantage of communist systems. From the

¹⁹ In fact, tabloid metropolitan newspapers controlled by Party papers have been operating like cash cows. Their profits are extracted by Party papers which fall far behind in terms of meeting readers' interest but can do little to change their styles because of their roles as the Party's mouthpiece and part of the transmission belt.

²⁰ A table tennis metaphor which means doing something controversial but still somewhat permissible.

1960s, the CCP's counterparts in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe had employed similar media strategies to help the leadership oversee restive local behaviour as well as addressing welfare issues of major public concern (White, 1986). In addition, the way the Chinese leadership utilised the media was very similar to the way they treated the law – 'an instrument for carrying out certain designs of the state' (Schram, 1987:x).

The CCP leadership in the 1990s was faced with a situation in which the centre was weaker, and untamed local governments were tempted by all sorts of economic incentives to engage in wrongdoing. It became increasingly difficult for the centre to enforce policies in the localities; as the popular saying went, 'Policies decided at Zhongnanhai did not make them out of Zhongnanhai'. However, leaders in Beijing were desperate to know the real situation on the ground because information they ultimately received had been carefully filtered or even fabricated, level-by-level in the Party-state hierarchy. As Lieberthal (1995:175) pointed out, the state itself became a victim of tight information control, because

[It] has led to a policy of suppressing all independent sources of information gathering and transmittal, such as a free press. By thus denying themselves the one relatively systematic option for checking the accuracy of the information they receive, the top Chinese leaders have made themselves virtual captives of their own system and of the distortions it inevitably produces.

Jiang and Zhu were thus determined to inject limited checks and balances into the system by allowing the media to partially fulfil their role as watchdogs. They used the media to expose 'officially denounced' wrongdoings in the localities and to air grievances for the people affected in order to 'smooth the rough edges of the ongoing Chinese transformation' (Zhao, 2000:591-2). Pioneered by China Central Television (CCTV)'s Focus programme (*jiaodian fangtan*), critical reports flourished in the mid 1990s. Zhu Rongji in particular stressed the importance of the media's watchdog role on numerous occasions and even personally visited CCTV's Focus programme to show support for

critical reporting (Nanfang Daily, 2011). In the late 1990s, investigative journalism became popular in Chinese media.

With the combination of leaders' political calculation and the media's profit motive, China's media landscape became more dynamic. This change was no more evident than in crisis and disaster reporting, as these became much less of a taboo from the mid-1990s onwards (Li, 2009). Disasters such as the 1998 flood and the 1999 Yantai shipwreck were covered rapidly. Notable among them was the Fanglin school explosion mentioned in the previous chapter, which was not only reported quickly by local metropolitan newspapers, but eventually resulted in an apology from Zhu Rongji who would have been otherwise cheated by the local government in Jiangxi province. However, disaster reporting during this period was characterised by objective reporting on details, combined with attempts to play down responsibility attribution, especially to senior officials – a style still prevalent today.

There were remarkable progresses during the Jiang era in the reporting of one-off crises after they tragically happened, such as natural disasters and industrial incidents. However, when it came to emerging crises, censorship was still prevalent and reporting would take much longer to go public. As previously mentioned, since the early Jiang era, GDPism has become the dominant development model, especially at the local level. Crises or negative news that had the potential to dampen the all-important local economic prospect would almost certainly have been censored. In such cases, censorship was often implemented at the local level but sometimes also strengthened from the centre as well. For instance, when the SARS crisis first emerged in late 2002 in Guangdong province, the news was first covered up by the local government but then banned nationally by the Central Propaganda Department when the situation was reported internally to Beijing (Wen, 2009). Certainly, the motives for a complete news blackout on the SARS outbreak

could be attributed to a mixture of economic and political considerations. Although the political caution to ensure that the once in a decade leadership transition would not be interrupted seemed to be the prime concern, it should be noted that equally important was Guangdong province's concern that news about the mysterious virus might disrupt economic activities and slow down GDP and FDI growth (Zheng and Lye, 2004).

This heavy censorship on emerging crises with potentially adverse economic implications seemed at odds with improved transparency on crisis reporting *ex post*. However, they were not contradictory in essence, but further confirmed the mere instrumental utility of the media as confined by the Party, as we suggested above. The fact that crises of different natures were treated differently, and the Party's readiness to switch the media on and off according to different situations, revealed its desire to manage the information flow in a way that only favoured the enhancement of its supremacy (Zeitlin, 2003). Given such distorted relations between the Party's supremacy and media openness, it was natural that policies in propaganda and thought work had to be adapted to serve the Party's overall priority, which was an overriding emphasis on economic growth at the time. From this understanding, these limited transparency measures did not so much represent a move to empower the media as disciplinary measures against localities, in the hope that they would promote economic development in line with central policies. Likewise, news that might jeopardise economic growth ought to be filtered in order to maintain market and consumer confidence, a prevalent post-1992 practice which Brady (2008:3) called 'economic propaganda'.

Jiang's propaganda policy of commercialising the media, though it bred media autonomy to a limited degree, in fact amplified the Party's voice in society through the explosive growth in the number of media outlets²¹. Overall, Jiang's economically

²¹ It was fair to state that owing to a surge in the number of media outlets carrying pro-CCP messages (especially in the form of economic propaganda, a good example would be promoting consumerism and

liberalising approach reflected the logic of establishing a socialist market economy, a principle enshrined at the 14th PC in 1992. It revealed the Party leadership's renewed commitments to openness and reform, a gesture that was believed to create a favourable international environment and better international perceptions of China, which would in turn favour China's domestic economic development. In addition, Jiang himself was said to have played a supporting role in introducing the Internet to China for stimulating economic growth (Duowei Blog, 2012). Despite the fact that economically-sensitive issues became a new area frequently subject to censorship, media control on many more topics which were considered politically sensitive in the 1980s were relaxed, and overall media control under Jiang was considerably looser than under Deng.

3.4.4 The Internet and Moulding Public Opinion under Hu

When Hu Jintao was inaugurated as General Secretary of the CCP in 2002 and President of the PRC in 2003 respectively, he faced a China with rising social tensions and inequality, more complex state-society relations and more interdependent external relations as a result of China's integration into the world economy and multilateral institutions. He once said, 'In balancing reform, development and stability, the contradictions and problems we face are rarely seen elsewhere in the world, in terms of both their scale and complexity' (Xinhua, 2008). In carefully navigating through these tremendous challenges, reformative space and policy options left for him were limited compared with his predecessors because of the fragility of a divisive society.

attributing these newly available choices to rising living standards as a result of the Party's open and reform policies. In this respect, the Party's discursive presence (be it in the forms of promoting consumerism or nationalism) in the society did not decline in the 1990s compared to the 1980s and sometimes it even increased. To what extent these messages were believed at the receiving end, was another matter.

In the realm of propaganda policy, there was no apparent distinctiveness during his ten years in power. Observers saw him choosing to go with the tide in terms of ongoing developments in state-society relations and fine tuning the level of media openness accordingly²². Interestingly, in the propaganda realm there were periodic resurgences of practices prevalent in the Mao, Deng and Jiang eras. This combination of past practices in his tenure was another indication that policy choices were locked in by the complex and changing socio-political landscape, and that path dependency was too strong to depart from.

From the point of view of the Party's division of power, another contributing factor of this lack of distinctiveness was that since Hu took office in 2002, the propaganda apparatus had enjoyed more authority in top decision making circles than it had under previous leadership eras. From 2002 to 2012, the Party's propaganda chief (Li Changchun) had a seat in the all-powerful Politburo Standing Committee (PSC), whereas in the past, the Party leader in charge of propaganda was only a member of the full Politburo and he had to make propaganda-related decisions in consultation with the General Secretary. In other words, Hu as a 'first among equals' General Secretary (Miller, 2011:5) had less of a say in propaganda than previous paramount leaders because many propaganda-related decisions were believed to be made by Li on his own.

However, first and foremost, Hu's inefficacy in putting his own stamp on the evolution of the CCP's propaganda should be attributed to the popularity of the Internet and the rise of grassroots or unorthodox discourses as its immediate consequence. This emergence of alternative sources of information and discourses represented a significant counterweight to the Party's traditional propaganda to the extent that in the Chinese academia, there has

²² It was evident in our three case studies in that even in regard to each individual crisis the permitted level of media transparency varied considerably in different stages of crisis development.

been discussion on and acceptance of the notion of two different public spaces in China (Fang, 2004).

I. The Two, Fractured Public Spaces

One public space was the official or ‘mainstream’ public space, dominated by state media which essentially performed their role as the Party’s mouthpiece preoccupied with conveying indoctrination from the top. The other public space was one formed by popular expressions on the Internet, dominated by grassroots discussion and even discourse (Fei, 2012). In this newly emerged and increasingly influential public space, information followed *horizontally* between citizens as opposed to the top-down communication of state media (Rawnsley, 2007). Moreover, as the level of online interaction between citizens increased, it posed a threat to the Party either in the form of offline organised activities or in their potential to challenge the Party’s hegemonic discourse in the form of a bottom-up alternative discourse.

This predicament of two public spaces arose because they did not often engage with each other, which exacerbated the alienation between the Party and the people. The two public spaces seemed to be preoccupied with their own agendas and there had been little resonance between the two. The official public space bombarded the populace with messages boasted of China’s domestic harmony and international prestige, which created a ‘virtual China’ filled with happiness and pride, whereas the grassroots public space presented a much more ‘real’ China, dominated by grievance and complaints about multifarious problems created by China’s ‘trapped transition’ (Pei, 2006). The contrast between the two was so stark that even the chief of the People’s Daily acknowledged a popular saying that ‘only by watching the CCTV News’s [positive stories] for seven

consecutive days could cure the negative emotion caused by browsing microblogs for just half a day' (Oriental Morning Post, 2012).

The huge gap between the two public spaces became a credibility gap when it came to political trust (Rawnsley, 2007). When something that had a great impact occurred but state media pretended that life was going on as normal, the thirst and curiosity for information by Internet users induced them to embrace whatever alternative sources of information were available, regardless of its authenticity. In this way, state media might well have been discredited by false information or even rumours – a propaganda fiasco for the Party which sought to mould public opinion in its favour. Also, the rampant spread of rumours caused what the regime feared most – social instability as a result of opacity.

Given the Internet's new empowerment of the people as well as the lack of connectivity between the two public spaces, the Party's means of information control in the pre-digital age (which was effective in the official public space only) became increasingly counterproductive in a wired era. This was most evident when it came to crisis communication. When SARS and other public health-related crises occurred, people were scrambling to flee the supposedly unsafe places and rushed into all sorts of panic buying which was based on gossip owing to the absence of official clarity. This chaos imposed great pressures on governance. The official public space often did not respond to the concerns of the grassroots public space until the situation had already become chaotic.

II. Bridging the Two Public Spaces

In light of the official media's increasingly marginalised position in public life in terms of both their influence and reputation (especially after the lesson of SARS), the Hu-Wen leadership took measures to increase transparency in the hope of rebuilding the

government's credibility. In a similar fashion to improving the people's right to information under Deng when new sources of information beyond the Party's control were available, Hu-Wen made considerable efforts to institutionalise and give legal backing to news reporting on facts that were impossible to conceal in an Internet era. According to the Party's latest rhetoric pertaining to propaganda, the people's 'rights to know, rights to participate, rights to express and rights to check' should be guaranteed (People's Daily, 2008a). This move was clearly oriented towards enhancing the regime's legal-rational legitimacy.

Rather than letting go of the potentially destructive undercurrent of unofficial information, the state sought to minimise its impact on social stability by proactively setting agendas and providing the official account before the issue became popular in public discussion, a media practice Hu Jintao explicitly encouraged (People's Daily, 2008a). Since SARS, state media has been prompt in reporting carefully edited facts and narratives on major incidents²³. In doing so, state media successfully prevented its position from being further marginalised because its press releases often came ahead of non-state and foreign media competitors, thanks to its more extensive reporter network and its privileged access to the scene. This advantage was amplified when a crisis occurred in a remote place. For instance, in the Sichuan earthquake and in the Urumqi riot in 2009, most international media had to quote Xinhua in their reports.

III. Further Media Professionalisation

For the official public space, being more transparent as a response to the Internet was not enough, as the audience of this public space has been in gradual decline. The young and

²³ But only one source of release was permitted, often the Xinhua News Agency, even other state media outlets had to reproduce exactly the Xinhua version.

educated generation regarded the Internet as the primary source of information, mainly owing to the state media's overly official and impersonal style. This dynamic demographical group, growing in influence, was thus alienated by the Party mouthpieces of CCTV and official newspapers. As of 2012, China had the largest online population in the world of 538 million (BBC, 2012). In order for the Party's voice to become more appealing to this ever expanding and increasingly picky audience, Hu furthered Jiang's efforts on professionalising the state media.

This professionalisation push was tripartite. First, state media outlets were required to improve their operations in terms of professional standards and audience consciousness, such as 'making reports according to media conventions'²⁴ and to 'research thoroughly the preferences of each audience group and their psychological characteristics, and cater media content accordingly' (People's Daily, 2008a). Successful media practices around the world – from methods of subtle mass persuasion in western democratic societies to outright but effective tactics of indoctrination in Cuba and North Korea – were studied, adapted and incorporated into Chinese media to improve their performance (Brady, 2008).

Second, the marketisation and commercialisation of the media has been furthered under Hu. Modelled upon western media conglomerates such as Murdoch, Chinese state media in the late Jiang era established a few giant media groups, and this process of merge and reconfiguration accelerated in the Hu era. Referred to as 'carriers' in the media industry, these media groups often brought newspapers, TV, radio and web portals under one roof in an attempt to rationalise resource utilisation and thus enhance their influence over society. These Party-controlled media groups were adept at taking advantage of a variety of means of financing provided by a market economy to strengthen the Party-state. Symbolically and ironically, the web portal of the People's Daily, the People's Net, has

²⁴ Here media convention was mentioned in contrast to propaganda, and referred to internationally accepted and tested (mostly western) communication theories and practices, as opposed to outmoded Party propaganda practices.

been listed on the Shanghai Stock Exchange since April 2012 (Financial Times, 2012a). These measures were not only aimed at strengthening state media financially, but were considered to secure China's cultural and ideological security by outcompeting those non-state and less financially able media outlets that promoted alternative discourses. They were also in line with the Party's renewed emphasis on 'cultural prosperity' and on developing a stronger cultural industry to enhance China's ideational appeal both at home and around the world (Gov.cn, 2011a).

While strengthening state media through market means has raised their visibility, it may come at the cost of (already limited) press freedom, because the integration of these media outlets was primarily achieved through the government-directed centralisation of resources. These media giants thus gained a monopoly, not based on their credibility, but on governmental support. More worryingly, they have been susceptible both to governmental influence and commercial profit motives after intense marketisation, whereas in the past they were only mainly constrained by the former. In effect, given the context of closely tied-up political and capital power, business interests could easily manipulate the media to their advantage, as long as they secured access to either power. The media, on the other hand, has not been provided with any institutional insurance²⁵ or significant (monetary or moral) incentives to be accountable to people's interests (Zhou, 2010). Media corruption where businesses paid off the media for false stories and advertising has thus been widespread. In the case study of the Sanlu milk scandal, we will see how this collusion did not just threaten public health, but the popular perception of the credibility of the government. It will also reveal that this ungoverned but profiteering trilateral intimacy between government, business and media has even led to non-state media's involvement in media corruption. Given that the Sanlu case was not the first such

²⁵ The Chinese legislature and academia discussed to enact a Press Law in the 1980s in order to not only protect press freedom but also make the media accountable to public interests, but the proposal was removed from the agenda because of the Tiananmen protest.

instance, it raised serious questions as to whether media commercialisation under a market authoritarian political system would lead to greater civil liberty.

Last, Hu sought to bridge the gap between the two public spaces by ‘mainstreaming’ the official public space. In this respect, some Maoist methods and practices were revived, especially the emphasis on the mass line (as opposed to the Party line which made official media look more like ‘media run for the officials’ rather than run for the people). More precisely, official media were still required to convey propaganda, but they were also expected to provide more and more informative messages to the people, using its exclusive access to government information and agencies. In Hu’s words, the official media should follow the norm of ‘three closeness’: ‘close to reality, close to real life and close to the masses’ (People’s Daily, 2008a). In so doing, official media permeated people’s everyday life as something essential, if not as appealing as those tabloid metropolitan media in the popular public space. This emphasised relevance to the populace was manifested most when the Party-state publicly recognised a crisis situation and took steps to combat it. We shall see in all case studies that the full mobilisation of official media was an integral part of crisis management. For the official media, it has become a political mission of reconnecting with the people to convey crucial information regarding their wellbeing. For instance, crucial information that was extensively publicised by the official media included daily updates on the pandemic situation during SARS and tips for how to avoid its transmission, and product recalls and safe lists during the milk scandal. In the first week following the Sichuan earthquake, the official media outperformed their foreign counterparts on promptness and details.

The other strand of ‘mainstreaming’ was to modernise the official media’s means of dissemination so as to reach previously lost audiences. The state invested heavily in state-of-the-art technology to help the official media outcompete non-state rivals, in order at

least partly to compensate for their disadvantaged reputation. In the Hu era, the project of expanding the influence of the official public space into the popular public space went much beyond simply hosting websites (which most media outlets had done a decade ago). Utilising the latest technology for propaganda could also happen offline. For example, many people have long found that CCTV's 7 o'clock news (*xinwen lianbo*) to be boring and rarely watched it at home. However, nowadays people have to live with it because it is now broadcast to commuters on every mobile TV, on the underground and on buses. Indeed, not all approaches used were that aggressive. Softer and more interactive methods were also used. For instance, many official media outlets in recent years had a presence in mainstream non-state social media to influence young audiences there with politically light messages. Like western political parties that saw online campaigns as part of their political marketing, top CCP leaders were sometimes invited to online chat rooms before important conferences to solicit opinions and hear complaints from netizens. At a Xinhua-hosted online interactive session in 2010, Wen Jiabao spoke specifically on the milk scandal and explained the remedial measures that had been put in place (Xinhua, 2010c). Because of its less formal communication style, online interaction with the people has become another crisis management or public relations approach that the Chinese leadership has been using (Chinese leaders had few chances to speak to the ordinary people and vice versa).

On the other hand, in terms of mainstreaming, non-state and online media have been 'mainstreamed' into the Party-state's formal institution for media censorship through cooption. Unlike in the Jiang era, when the Party propaganda apparatus acted reactively and only rushed to delete inappropriate content once it was already in the public domain, in the Hu era, content like this was everywhere and the same strategy would stretch the censorship mechanism too greatly. The Party therefore took pre-emptive measures to macro-manage media content by revising laws and provisions in relation to the media,

especially online content, which western Internet providers had to obey when operating in China²⁶. Less binding but more practical rules were made by associations of Internet providers (which again co-opted western and non-state Chinese companies) for Internet businesses to follow. In terms of the day to day micro management, extra-judicial directives regarding content were dispatched from various agencies more frequently during crises (Brady, 2012). Most directives were issue-based, requested that chief editors at major websites be prepared to filter content before discussion regarding an event of major disruption gained momentum²⁷. These orders comprised more sophisticated tactics than simply deleting – for example, what to play down (or up), what to recommend to netizens on pop-up windows, and which keywords to filter in search engines. All this was to ensure that any disrupting news was only known to a tiny community of intellectuals and dissidents.

In addition, as the rules for website hosting have been tightened in recent years to encourage the culture of self-censorship, many site owners have made explicit rules for their users and prohibited the discussion of politics. In effect, this delegated the task of censorship level-by-level, gave agents outside the Party-state apparatus considerable power over information control. Predictably, this power has been abused, as we will see in the milk scandal case.

IV. Moulding Public Opinion

Constructed their image as populist leaders, the Hu-Wen leadership posited itself on the centre-left stage of China's political spectrum. This was a deliberate effort, despite the fact

²⁶ Content providers such as Yahoo and Internet infrastructure providers like Cisco have cited these regulations as an excuse for their cooperation with the Chinese government.

²⁷ For illustration, see orders from various censors regarding the awarding of Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo at <http://zhenlibu.wordpress.com/2010/10/08/liuxiaobo/>

that both leaders embarked on political careers in poor, inland provinces. When they took power in 2002-3, the growth of China's economic and social inequality was accelerating as a result of a decade-long, pro-market liberalisation under Jiang-Zhu that disproportionately benefited those who were politically well connected. At the same time, the political spectrum became even more stretched, represented by the growing popularity of the New Left and the Old Left, as well as liberals at both ends, at the cost of the officially promoted, state-led capitalist developmentalism. The leading sociologist, Sun Liping, argued as early as 2005 that the reform consensus had largely broken down (Economic Observer, 2005).

With the New Left and the liberals radically advocating their prescribed alternatives, and with the Old Left's ability to mobilise mass discontent with the current development model, the Hu-Wen leadership as a weak central leadership had to take with caution any reforms that might seem to favour either camp, especially in the realm of ideology. What they wanted (or the only option left) was to build up as much economic capacity as possible in the so called period of strategic opportunities, and continued to tinker with the current system. In other words, without a reform consensus, they were (at least being perceived as) replacing (socio-political) reform with (economic) development. In Hu's own words, 'No waver, no slack and no U-turn [with the current development path]' (Xinhua, 2008; 2012), which resembled Deng's 'No debate' thesis proclaimed in 1992.

Despite the distaste of the 'no U-turn' thesis among intellectuals, it was more acceptable to the ordinary people who have been largely absent from the ideological debate. They were primarily concerned with economic insecurity and therefore craved stability (Brady, 2012; Shue, 2004), which the political system seemed to provide. The Hu-Wen leadership therefore turned to the ordinary people for support (or at least their acceptance) of the status quo, instead of appealing to the elites.

The average Chinese citizen seemed to have a high degree of responsiveness to media content (Landry and Stockmann, 2009). It was thus vital to ‘mould public opinion’ among the majority of the populace (who were too busy making a living to be ideologically conscious), which had been the major theme of propaganda and thought work for the Hu era. The greatest effort in relation to moulding and manipulating favourable public opinion was concentrated in the grassroots public space and on the Internet in particular. Moderate forms of this moulding practices included an all out ‘go online’ campaign for government agencies. For an indication of the scale, as of June 2012 there were 25,866 governmental agencies represented in social media and 19,155 officials microblogging using their real identities, among whom there were 30 senior officials ranked above vice-ministerial level (People’s Net, 2012a). The effectiveness of guiding online public opinion with a ubiquitous government presence remained to be seen. Yet the interactivity that social media offered presumably made this approach more popular than traditional Party propaganda transmitted through offline means.

There was also a radical form of public opinion moulding – that was, the Party’s application of the Maoist ‘people’s war’ for online propaganda. For many, this was very controversial because it involved Internet commentators supported by the Party, or the notorious ‘50 Cent Army’²⁸. These people were trained spin doctors that suddenly emerged to flood social media and public forums with pro-government messages when a crisis or an incident occurred that made the government embarrassed. In recent years, the use of such commentators seemed to have expanded without restraint in that most government agencies or even some work units established their own teams to manipulate favourable opinion (BBC, 2008c). Such distortion took advantage of the Internet’s flattened hierarchy and anonymity, and often had the potential to shift debates, made it even more difficult to

²⁸ They were alleged to get paid 0.5 Yuan (*wumao*) for every pro Party message they posted online. For an exemplary list of events that they manipulated, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/50_Cent_Party

gauge the ‘real’ public mood because it was hard to tell what portion of the discussion was government sponsored. Various government agencies have been complacent about the effect of this new approach in crisis management and public relations, because such an approach would at least confuse the people, if not completely convince them. Yet in the long term, such distortion will hamper the cultivation of a pluralist Chinese public space, especially the culture of reason and tolerance, which the current highly polarised and crisis-ridden society badly needs.

In sum, state control of information in the Hu era was marked by contradictions, as was reflected in the application of a mix of past practices from the Mao, Deng and Jiang eras. And, in many respects, the media have been repoliticised. Faced with challenges posed by the Internet, especially in Hu’s second term, the Party-state was still in the process of experimenting with new control and guiding measures (technological as well as organisational) in response to new demands arose out of an increasingly divisive yet digitally and globally connected society. As we shall see in our three crises, these contradictions were paralleled with the periodic loosening or tightening of media control. Initiatives to improve transparency were tested during crises, but they could not withstand the comeback of old reflexes as the Party’s confidence faded, and the control mentality triumphed over openness. The failure to institutionalise open measures and the persistence of Maoist legacies (albeit moving from offline to the online arena) again pointed to the need for genuine political reforms.

3.5 State-society Relations

This section concerns the PRC’s state-society dynamics revolving around crises for which its nature evolved from being almost consensual in the early 1950s to becoming largely

conflictual in the present day. As social stratification developed throughout the last six decades, attitudes towards crises or tensions between state and society, or among different strata within society itself, diverged substantially. To distinguish between these contrasting attitudes, we borrow Rosenthal and Kouzmin's (1997) typology. 'Consensual crisis' denotes emergencies in which all crisis beholders share the same perception regarding a (often external) palpable threat and agree upon strategies of crisis response. On the other hand, 'conflictual crisis' refers to situations in which crisis beholders differ on the essence of a crisis owing to their diverging interests, which may eventually mean that they define the same situation in antagonistic terms and take confrontational actions accordingly. Most crises have both consensual and conflictual aspects at different stages of their development, owing to the issue of the objectivity and subjectivity of crisis which we discussed in the last chapter.

3.5.1 Mao's Monolithic Body Politic

The above distinction, as well as the potential exchangeability between consensual and conflictual crisis, reminds us of the Mao era when all crises were defined in class struggle terms. Mao famously distinguished between antagonistic contradictions and non-antagonistic contradictions (Mao, 1957). The former denoted contradictions between the enemies and the people, which necessitated the suppression of enemies by the people through dictatorship. The latter denoted contradictions among the people, which should be resolved through democratic centralism.

Mao's China was highly monolithic. The uncompromising Leninist political structure, with its clear and hierarchical line of command, effectively suppressed societal autonomy, while the centralisation of economic resources through the socialist transformation enabled

state power to intrude upon social life deeply. By 1956, the Chinese state and society became a much more integrated and organic body politic than it was before 1949. A prominent feature of strengthened state control in the PRC era was that, for the first time in Chinese history, the state's formal and institutional power took root below the county level and into the immense countryside²⁹. Much of this was achieved by the expansion of the Party's Leninist structure into as far as the village level. With a strong, top-down apparatus and high level of regime legitimacy at the time, the CCP was able to mobilise the whole of Chinese society for its goals, albeit increasingly at huge costs.

In addition to organisational unity, other important socialist institutions also blurred the boundary between the state and the society, and between the public and the private. In the urban area, workers were attached to work units (*danwei*) while rural residents were organised into People's Communes; both institutions formed the backbone of the CCP's mobilisation vehicle. As these institutions dealt with every aspect of a citizen's social life and even part of their family life, the societal realm was very weak and susceptible to state intervention. Chinese society (if it existed) was merely the extension and peripheral of the Party-state.

Such a highly unified state-society structure gave rise to formidable mobilisation capacity, which was routinely utilised to counter consensual crises framed in antagonistic terms. This framing was especially effectual when the target against which the mass mobilisation was waged was constructed upon a perceived external threat or challenge. Typical examples included mobilisation against or in preparation for perceived aggression from the US in the 1950s and from the Soviets in the 1960s.

²⁹ It was undeniable that in the pre-1949 era the ROC had already extended its administrative apparatus into the countryside. However, the ROC's state power was severely impeded by then prevalent warlordism and obstinate localism. As a result, the ROC's central government for most of the time had no effective control over the countryside, let alone had taken root.

In addition, nationwide campaigns against infectious diseases in the 1950s and against natural disasters throughout the early PRC period were exemplary. These mass movements often turned radical and were heavily politicised. Nonetheless, the legacies of such a heavy-handed approach had proven its utility in quickly containing SARS half a century later.

Mao's China appeared to be a monolith from the outside. From within, however, contradictions, and non-antagonistic contradictions in particular, were prevalent in the state and the society. This was where the tactics of mobilising the masses to precipitate and resolve conflictual crises came into play, owing to Mao's loosely defined nature of contradictions. For Mao, antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions were interchangeable because the dividing line between the people and the enemies was dynamic and constantly shifting – whom belonged to which grouping all depended on the specific historical moment as well as on the political context associated with it (Mao, 1957). In other words, there was plenty of fluidity within the body politic, as opposed to apparent rigidity such that the political statuses of individuals and social classes alike (whether they belonged to the people or not) could be reversed according to the Party's calculation.

This 'flexibility' (if not arbitrary) in turn led to easy convertibility between non-antagonistic contradictions and antagonistic contradictions. As a result, the Party often took advantage of the deliberate ambiguity in political status that it allocated to each social class, cultivating a consensus among its preferred classes (the people, or sometimes the advanced portion of the people), and then rallying them behind the Party to suppress other alienated classes. This tactical social engineering of divide and rule has continued until the present day as an effective method of social control to which the Party often resorts during crises, despite Party claims since the 1990s that it is no longer a class-based revolutionary

party (*geming dang*) but a governing party (*zhizheng dang*) that is concerned with all people (Schubert, 2008).

This type of manipulation in the Mao era was most evident when conflictual crises needed to be transformed into consensual ones – i.e. when there were diverse perceptions regarding a dilemma that resulted in the absence of an overwhelming consensus, and when the problem mainly originated endogenously rather than being caused by an external threat. The most classic example was the Anti-Rightist Movement. This movement initially started as a rectification campaign for the masses and intellectuals in particular to air their dissatisfactions with the Party – a typical discursive and conflictual case (conflictual in that the people then had no common complaints against the CCP, and the nature of contradictions was clearly non-antagonistic, as initially recognised by the Party itself). When the criticism turned sharp, with proposals appearing to challenge the CCP's political hegemony, the CCP fought back and depicted those outspoken intellectuals as enemies, sacked them from their jobs and named and shamed them politically. The nature of contradictions therefore escalated from being non-antagonistic to being antagonistic. At the same time, the CCP turned this conflictual crisis into a consensual one by instigating the masses to expose those intellectuals with exaggerated allegations, thus cultivated a consensus among the people to purge these newly found enemies³⁰.

State-society dynamics such as the above provided good evidence to demonstrate Maoist China's distinctiveness from conventional authoritarianism. Unlike other classic authoritarian regimes where popular participation in the political process was tightly controlled, Maoist China not only encouraged such mass involvement but from time to

³⁰ The notions of the consensual crisis and antagonistic contradictions were not in conflict with each other in this context. Although the contradictions in question were antagonistic in nature, only the people (as defined by the CCP) could participate the process through which the consensus was formed and those deemed the people's enemies were deprived the freedom of expression. In this sense, the crisis was a consensual one among the people, despite the fact that they had different opinions on the question of how these enemies of the people should be punished.

time compelled its people to express their critical opinions against slacking and corrupt elements within the Party-state (Perry, 2007). One institutionalised channel of popular participation, which was devised in the Mao era but continues into the present day (despite its focus changing from political mobilisation and citizen efficacy in the Mao era to addressing individual grievances in the post-Mao era), is the letters and petitions system.

Although functionally similar to its imperial precursor of palace memorials, censorate and complaint drums in redressing injustice, letters and petitions were utilised by the CCP as an instrument for the more fundamental goal of regime consolidation through consensus building (Feng, 2012; Luehrmann, 2003). Furthermore, this state-sanctioned channel of complaints served two additional purposes. One was to establish a separate and supposedly more accurate channel of information alongside the formal one within the bureaucracy, and sought to overcome the problem of information distortion prevalent with the latter. The other purpose was to enhance the stability of the system by encouraging people to use this channel as an outlet for popular discontent. Taken together the central leadership wanted to solicit public opinion (for possible moulding) through the letters and petitions system, whilst creating a safety valve within an authoritarian system in which bottom-up pressure could be unleashed and absorbed.

In the Mao era, mass work emphasised participatory consensus building. The ethos of ‘from the masses, to the masses’ was central to the letters and petitions work. Indeed, the CCP heavily manipulated both input and output ends. On the input side, rather than responding to multifarious demands from the masses, the state often geared the focus of mass complaints towards the ongoing class struggle or periodic major contradictions, and attached importance mainly to those complaints that fitted the theme. In other words, political mobilisation-oriented letters and petitions work resembled a scenario where the Party set the theme and put up an empty storyboard in which the masses filled their

individual grievances that validated and enhanced the Party's insightful claims. Once individual complaints of the preferred nature reached a critical mass, a consensus and consensual crisis perception were moulded and consolidated because the raw materials of which they were formed were from the people themselves. In addition, as letters and petitions involved significant popular participation, the masses assumed the manipulated consensual crisis perception as their own. Moreover, in popular participation, through appealing to the state, the masses, with or without ideological consciousness, were likely to have identified with and internalised policies and lines supported by the Party. The Party viewed it as a nurturing process through which the masses could educate themselves.

In drastic cases where individuals made their way to Beijing and appealed before the central government, this tendency to buy in to Party-propagated values was more evident owing to deep rooted popular faith in the central government. For a brief period, the location for central government officials to receive the visiting masses was moved to Xinhua Gate, the symbolic main entrance to the CCP headquarters, and the State Council even stipulated that petitioners who made their way to Beijing could have their travel and living expenses covered (Feng, 2012). Precisely because such contentious politics within the institutionalised channel largely helped to strengthen the authority of central government and to sustain the regime's legitimacy more generally (Luehrmann, 2003), the letters and petitions system continued despite the fact that law-based channels have been available since the 1980s.

On the output side, i.e. when it came to resolving the consensual crisis, the Party often claimed the manipulated consensus to be the genuine 'general will', and justified ruthless and sometimes violent purges in the name of the people. In many cases of purging, the law was largely ignored and the rule of mob-style populism prevailed. In fact, including the letters and petitions system, the mass work in the Mao era was marked by such volatile

state-society dynamic processes, involving first exposing, then provoking and finally resolving contradictions (Feng, 2012), on the basis of which numerous crises were fabricated to pit one class or stratum against another for the purpose of finding and eliminating new enemies. A famous example was that in 1963, Mao depicted a crisis of peaceful revolution by alleging that one third of the CCP's regime had fallen into the hands of the enemy. He subsequently mobilised the masses in the Socialist Education Movement to counter the reactionaries (Gao, 2000).

As one political movement after another swept China, class contradictions were intensified and so were the fabricated crises associated with them, despite the fact that these moulded crises became increasingly irrelevant to the needs and concerns of ordinary people, but were purely created for the sake of power struggle. As shifting coalitions within the society and purges became routine, the Party-state operated in a constant mode of crisis. This culminated in the disastrous Cultural Revolution, wherein the fever of mass mobilisation destroyed the legal system along with the police, the procuratorate and the court. China was thrown into a quasi civil war, the consequences of which led to the eventual breakdown of Maoism.

3.5.2 The Deng Era and the Rule by Law

As previously mentioned in this chapter, Deng rose to prominence primarily because of his skilful framing of the crisis with Maoist economic and political institutions, to which he proposed more realistic and rational alternatives. Up until 1989, the Deng era was characterised by loosening and decentralising state control, despite a number of conservative reactions against this liberalising trend.

Economic liberalisation since the late 1970s had implications on social control. The dichotomy between urban and rural populations was gradually changing following the abolition of the commune system, after which rural residents were allowed to look for jobs in (effectively private) township enterprises and in the cities. In the cities, although the *danwei* system still constituted the primary economic institution to which most urbanites were attached, state employment had contracted since private and foreign businesses were permitted. These changes considerably weakened the CCP's mobilisation potential which rested on party branches in the state sector. At the same time, price reform and rationalised incentive structures gave rise to a 'commodity economy' (later defined as a market economy) with the significantly improved availability of consumer goods. As a result, in everyday life, people had more choices in terms of goods and lifestyle, were more mobile and thus had more personal freedom than in the Mao era. The imperative to improve economic performance (which both liberal and conservative camps agreed upon) required increasing decentralisation; flexibility and individual initiative also meant that it would be impossible for Maoist near totalitarian regime of social control to return.

At the societal level, state-society relations were easing in the wake of depoliticisation. Here, a comparative perspective could be useful. The theory of post-mobilisation regimes suggested that communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the USSR followed a similar trajectory in terms of state-society relations. In these regimes, mass political mobilisation was utilised in their early years for rapid modernisation. Once they had undergone the initial phase of industrialisation, however, they would suffer from a gradual decay in revolutionary fever among the people, who became exhausted and disillusioned with the communist utopian. In light of the failure of the utopian vision, and to keep the economy going, these regimes then had to rehabilitate the societal sphere by creating a less

politicised and more liberal society. This was exactly what happened in China under Deng (Johnson, 1970; Nathan, 1997).

Deng's move to end mass political terror successfully won the hearts and minds of people who aspired to a change from the radical politics under Mao. Indeed, Deng garnered support from millions of people (mostly former elites) for such a change by redressing numerous cases of political persecution while he was emerging as the paramount leader. This policy of reinstalling competent professionals back to their rightful place considerably compensated for the society's losing faith in the Party, and was especially appreciated by intellectuals and Party veterans who were still loyal to the Party. Deng took up the 'Four Modernisations' goal set by Zhou Enlai in 1963 during the readjustment and recovery period and called on the people to make up the decade wasted on the Cultural Revolution. He understood that realising these goals could no longer rely on the Great Leap Forward-style emotional motivation, but on expertise. To this end, the education system was put back to normal and the University Admissions Examination was resumed, which many viewed as a precious asset for promoting equal opportunities (Zhang et al, 2012). In general, Chinese people experienced a good degree of emancipation in all aspects of life, and Chinese society created more chances for upward mobility in the context of (largely harmonious) state-society relations. Among all social strata, intellectuals (especially those in the social sciences) and the media benefited the most from the loosened political environment. They not only enjoyed more breathing space for their professions, but helped to create a more plural public sphere that in turn buttressed (or pressed for) further reforms. The fact that several waves of student movements were sustained for months and received sympathy from the state media before the government clampdown was itself reflective of the relative freedom intellectuals enjoyed in the 1980s.

Certainly, the proliferation of both authorised and unauthorised intellectuals-led organisations contributed directly to student unrest and channelled support to students from the wider society. These were deemed evidence that a nascent civil society emerged in the 1980s (Chamberlain, 1993). In fact, as there were no applicable laws, the registration of these organisations had been loosely managed until the Tiananmen uprising awakened the authorities. The degree of relaxation in the 1980s has not been seen since 1989.

Nevertheless, there were major hurdles to full societal equality. Although class-based discrimination was abandoned in practice owing to its incompatibility with a meritocratic and technocratic society, at the institutional and legal level, discrimination still remained. As a compromise to Party conservatives, the largely rewritten and what became the 1982 PRC constitution (the current version) still implicitly implies that not everyone belongs to ‘the people’, and that those who do not will not be entitled to civil rights, which can only be enjoyed by ‘the people’. There is a designated paragraph on this in the preamble of the 1982 Constitution:

The exploiting classes as such have been abolished in our country. However, class struggle will continue to exist within certain bounds for a long time to come. The Chinese people must fight against those forces and elements, both at home and abroad, that are hostile to China’s socialist system and try to undermine it. (NPC, 2004)

Clause One of the 1982 Constitution again confirms the nature of this Party-state as a ‘people’s democratic dictatorship’ (NPC, 2004). This dictatorship clause actually justifies extra-judicial measures against ‘enemies’, which presents a normative conflict with a subsequent clause that guarantees equality before the law for all PRC citizens. The existence of this dictatorship clause also potentially undermines later efforts on ideological reform in the attempt to keep the Party-state relevant to the changing social-economic realities, such as ‘rule by law’ in the Deng era and the ‘Three Representatives’ under Jiang (Chu, 2012).

In fact, the persistence of the class-struggle mentality has been more evident in practice than in ideology. Even before 1989, Party conservatives initiated several quasi class struggle campaigns that caused a considerable stir within society, such as the Anti-Spiritual Pollution in 1983, the Anti-Bourgeois liberalism in 1986, and the ‘Strike Hard’ campaign against criminals in 1983, during which petty crimes could lead to the death penalty and was justified as a harsh punishment against class enemies. This enemy mentality has had a lasting effect well beyond the 1980s and is still found in the contemporary era, whenever the government seeks to justify extra-judicial measures in a crisis in order to strengthen its control over society. In such cases, blame has often been put on enemies at home and abroad, regardless of their actual existence or whether they were the major source of the threat. Examples include the suppression of Falungong in 1999 and the ethnic unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang in 2008 and 2009 respectively.

The political sphere under Deng was regarded by most China specialists as having undergone the fewest reforms. Nevertheless, limited political reform still had a considerable (intended and unintended) effect on empowering society and individuals. Themselves being victims of the Cultural Revolution, Deng and other ruling elites were concerned with fixing the system to avoid another Cultural Revolution as well as eliminating any future possibility of arbitrary and volatile politics under the ‘rule of man’, like Mao. They decided to abandon Maoism not for the sake of opening up the political system, but for the indefinite longevity of one party rule, which could only become a possibility if normal politics was conducted according to formal procedures and established rules. In other words, they wanted to strengthen the system through regularity and predictability³¹. The concept of ‘rule of law’ was therefore added to the CCP’s post-

³¹ This was very important for China in the late 1970s because for a country desperately needed to open up and rejoin international trade, it had to be perceived by the international community as a stable regime whose behaviour was predictable.

Mao ideology, a move aimed at enhancing the Weberian legal-rational legitimacy of the regime.

It should be noted that by proclaiming ‘rule of law’, the CCP actually wanted ‘rule by law’. The difference is remarkable in terms of the supremacy of the law. Put simply, in the former, the law is preeminent, and both state power and individual behaviour are equally subject to it. The ‘rule of law’ thus incorporates connotation of checks and balances in the liberal democratic tradition (Keith, 1991); in the latter, such liberal connotations are minimal, and the status of law is largely reduced to its instrumental purpose of effective governance and even to suppression in a legalistic manner (Tamanaha, 2004). Under ‘rule by law’, the Party remains the ultimate arbiter and oversees the functioning of the legal system, although in theory it should remain restrained when it comes to intervening in day to day legal affairs. Such a purpose is clearly reflected in another popular phrase in the CCP’s discourse, ‘governing the country in accordance with the law’. This flexibility, where the Party is supreme in a rule by law framework, however, justifies the politicisation of the legal system when the Party feels it necessary and it has become the source of controversy on judicial independence for over 30 years.

The determination to implement instrumental ‘rule by law’ was demonstrated by the high profile and nationally televised trial of the ‘Gang of Four’ in 1980, as well as by the harsh punishment to several ‘princelings’ involved in criminal activities in the mid-1980s. ‘Rule by law’-oriented political reform also strengthened Party-state institutions via the introduction of term and age limits on public office holders.

According to Weberian political sociology, the efficacy of laws lends predictability to economic transactions, especially economic contracts (Keith, 1991). As a result, efforts on rule by law did spill over from high politics to society in order to give economic development institutional assurance. The huge volume of economic transactions and the

diversification of ownership led by economic reform rendered the Party's micro control undesirable and unattainable. The Party thus 'delegated' a large part of micro-level control to legal institutions and only retained macro-level control. This retreat from day to day socio-economic affairs laid the foundations of a law-based society and nurtured its (previously heavily suppressed) ability to be self-organised and self-governing. Like economic reform, self-governing was first tested in the countryside in the late 1980s. The Organic Law of Village Committees stipulated direct and regular elections for village leaders, set out the procedures for these elections (for example, the introduction of a secret ballot), as well as providing for the impeachment of village leaders (Gov.cn, 2010b). This bottom-up political reform potentially empowered some 600 million Chinese with the right to vote (BBC, 2005).

Moreover, this top-down empowerment also touched upon the more contentious issue of the abuse of state power. As China's governing structure has become increasingly decentralised since the 1980s in order to stimulate economic growth and encourage local-level experiments, local arbitrary power and official corruption have been on the rise. Instead of using Maoist-style mass mobilisation to check local power holders, Deng resorted to the law as an institutional buffer against political volatility. The Administrative Litigation Law enacted in 1989, for example, provided individuals with the option to sue the state, and ordinary people were winning an increasing number of cases against the arbitrary abuse of power by local governments and officials (Nathan, 2003). As a consequence of this social learning regarding the efficacy of laws, citizen petitions and complaints have been increasingly couched in rights discourses and legalistic language. Resorting to the law in the hope of resolving grievances, along with the letters and petitions system mentioned earlier, constituted the majority of 'rightful resistance' – a form of rights-based contentious politics that took place within the confinement of established,

and officially permitted, channels of appeals. This peculiar form of intra-institutional resistance emerged in the Deng era, but prevailed in the Jiang era.

As seen from the preceding discussion, in spite of state predominance, the balance of power in state-society relations shifted in favour of the people before 1989. This was an era when society had revitalised and started its detachment from the state, yet had not split from within. The reform consensus was relatively strong and was characterised as ‘reform without losers’ (Lau et al, 2000), which had held the masses and most elites together and produced largely positive-sum interactions between the state and the society, as well as within the society itself. However, as political reforms lagged behind economic reforms, the resulting gap was perceived by the people to be benefiting the privileged. The discontent in this was compounded by high inflation in 1988, leading to the prelude to Tiananmen. In this respect, the applicability of the U-Curve extended to China in 1988-1989. The U-Curve predicted that societal uprisings became much more likely to occur when, following a constant improvement in living standards, an intolerable expectation gap would emerge if there was a perceived deterioration of prospects that could not keep up with people’s expectations based on the previous rate of improvement (Davies, 1962). At that time, the exact sentiment was prevalent among urbanites, especially intellectuals. This was fuelled by high inflation and a premature price reform which meant that people feared their hard-earned savings would be eroded.

A more open, yet not divisive society, had a huge bottom-up organising potential that proved to be challenging to the Party-state as early as the 1986 student movement. However, the 1989 movement was different in that it encompassed most urban sector employees and led to a state of anarchy; a holistic crisis in dozens of Chinese cities. Ironically, the then still largely robust *danwei* system served as the mobilisation vehicle to precipitate the crisis, but this time it was from the bottom-up – demonstrations were largely

organised according to state designated sectors and protesters marched through the streets of Beijing with banners revealing their officially designated identities (e.g. students, workers and journalists) (Perry, 2007)³². The 1989 demonstrations were the most autonomous social movement in the history of the PRC, if not the largest. However, the subsequent tragedy of Tiananmen ruined most of the liberalising change which occurred in society and societal faith in the Party's benevolence evaporated. As Beijing urbanites denounced the CCP as 'fascists' following the massacre, the CCP was faced with another legitimacy crisis.

3.5.3 The Jiang Era and Popular Contention

I. Stability above All

The Tiananmen uprising shocked the CCP leadership, which mainly comprised survivors of the Cultural Revolution who all had bitter memories about the destructive power of mass mobilisation. They were therefore determined to eliminate any root of organised challenge against the Party-state. Under the rubric of 'stability above all', state-society relations in the immediate aftermath of Tiananmen were overwhelmed by antagonistic class struggle, where political terror briefly swept through China in the name of dictatorship over saboteurs of socialism. In 1989-1991, the Party shifted its mode of rule from consent-based to coercive-clientelistic-based (Gilley, 2008). Numerous protesters were arrested and university students were sent to military camps for re-education. Political vetting was implemented within the government, higher education establishments

³² Although they joined force in this popular 'democratic movement', their visions of democracy were very different. Many intellectuals aspired to western liberal democracy but most workers aspired to the Maoist notion of proletariat people's democracy.

and other public institutions that affected tens of thousands reform-minded intellectuals. Reform programmes devised before 1989 were either halted or reversed, and institutional space for societal autonomy was greatly squeezed. For instance, the National People's Congress (NPC) hastily enacted the PRC Assembly, Demonstration and Protest Law, only four months after the crackdown. The Law explicitly banned demonstrations against any officially upheld ideology and stipulated that to hold any demonstrations with (officially deemed) lawful appeals needed permission from the public security bureau, with the exception of celebrations and commemorations staged by the state (Xinhua, 2005). This new legislation rendered any demonstrations not sponsored by the state infeasible, and most of those that did erupt were 'illegal' in principle.

II. The Emergence of a Corporatist Civil Society

The state also reasserted itself by tightening its control over civic organisations. Pan-political organisations such as cultural salons, pro-democracy publishers and journals were completely banned by the government (Zhang, 2003). Yet its approach to non-political organisations was more realistic. Facing mountains of social problems caused by an exclusive focus on economic growth, the government recognised the usefulness of civic organisations in addressing dislocations that were too diverse for the government to handle. It therefore devised a quasi-corporatist governing structure to monitor these organisations at the macro level (Unger and Chan, 1993). This desire for governance devolution in order to improve the efficiency of social control was illustrated in the promulgation of regulations that laid out a 'dual management' system. This system aimed to bring these organisations under the auspices of the government, but without constraining their instrumental utility in dealing with market and governmental failures. Under this

system, there was a high barrier for registration in order to ensure political loyalty – the organisation in question had to find a sponsor agency before registering with the civil affairs authorities. In addition, an organisation may only be engaged in activities under the registered category and operate within a designated geographical area (Yu, 2006).

In general, this quasi-corporatist approach has contributed to improved governance by integrating social initiatives and resources into governmental goals of sustainable economic and social development. Particularly with two additional pro-social initiatives laws enacted in 1998³³, the number of civic organisations increased dramatically as Chinese people took advantage of the new openings to pursue new social initiatives following top-down legal reforms (Cooper, 2006). Starting initially with environmental protection, the issues concerning civic organisations have steadily expanded into such areas as public health, poverty alleviation, migrate workers, women, legal and policy advocacy as well as the provision of social services, including in times of crisis. The government tended to view civic organisations with an instrumental utility from a positive-sum perspective.

However, despite a high registration requirement, this ‘dual management’ system – which brought civic organisations and government agencies into close proximity with one another – still fell short of avoiding all political risks. Some grassroots organisations lacking both financial resources and political connections chose to operate underground, even though their activities were largely uncontroversial. Even worse, some ambitious organisations pursued goals well beyond what were permitted and over the years quietly developed an astonishing nationwide membership base that could be quickly mobilised to challenge the Party-state. The best example was the ‘sudden’ eruption of Falungong in 1998-1999. It was initially registered as a Qigong society and was affiliated with the

³³ They were the ‘Regulations on the Registration and Management of Non-Government and Non-Commercial Enterprises’ and the ‘Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organisations.’

official Qigong association (Human Rights Watch, 2002). During its rapid growth in the 1990s, it promoted a set of ethical principles, such as ‘Truth, Goodness, and Forbearance’, that were critical to the moral collapse which characterised Chinese society in transition, and even challenged the state’s legitimisation claims (Shue, 2004). Before being outlawed, Falungong even staged a large protest outside Zhongnanhai, the CCP’s headquarters. Unsurprisingly, the Party-state launched an antagonistic campaign to eradicate Falungong and also strengthened its control over the corporatist regime – all civic organisations were required to re-register, and those considered dubious were closed down. The number of civic organisations shrunk from 180,000 in 1995 to 160,000 in 2000 (Zhang, 2003).

Interestingly, after the Falungong case, the government became wary of *any* organisations with a large following. It banned various Qigong and even pyramid selling groups. They were banned not because of the way they made money, but owing to their huge membership – some of them were alleged to have over ten million members. For NGO expert Professor Kang Xiaoguang, ‘The government’s attitude is, no matter which organisation or for whatever purpose, it is not allowed as long as it has a lot of people in it...the government does not care much about how much money NGOs own, but it does care about their sizes in terms of membership; it worries most about NGOs’ potential for collective actions’ (Mingpao, 2008). Falungong was ruthlessly suppressed precisely because of the government’s fear about its mobilisation capacity for collective action (it developed an organisational structure similar to that of the CCP).

III. Rightful Resistance

While the Party-state was adapting to changing social realities by devising and modifying a quasi-corporatist civil society structure in the cities, the political landscape in the same

period was more contentious in the countryside, as local power holders became more predatory to rural residents. This should have become a grave concern for the Party, because people affected there were largely supportive of the CCP by virtue of the de-collectivisation, through which their living standards improved substantially (and as a result they played only a marginal role in the 1989 protests) (O'Brien, 2009).

Notwithstanding this huge governance deficit, the government seemed to be more confident politically in handling these rural contestations. Here the nature of resistance mattered. The formation of a nascent civil society, despite being controlled through a corporatist framework and no matter how peaceful or obedient their activities remained, urban self-organisation autonomous of the state carried an anti-establishment connotation. Especially after learning what similar organisations were capable of in Eastern Europe before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the Chinese government ineluctably viewed autonomous organisations suspiciously³⁴. On the other hand, resistance in the countryside was intra-institutional – petitioners resorted to government-devised channels of inclusion to appeal to the central state. As previously argued, this type of resistance would potentially enhance regime legitimacy if it was handled well, because by opting to participate in the appeal process petitioners should have exhibited a degree of faith in the system. In contrast to disobedient civil society activities, rural protests were more of an indigenous phenomenon with a long-standing history, owing to China's peculiar central-local relations, and reflected a degree of political loyalty rather than alienation.

This particular form of institutionalised or intra-institutional appeals is characterised as 'rightful resistance' (O'Brien, 1996). In contrast with extra-institutional defiance, where dissidents often resort to open violence or some disguised unlawful actions, rightful

³⁴ Although there has been no consensus in China regarding the nature of Chinese civil society or its level of independence from the state, the notion of civil society did imply the intrusion and dilution of (authoritarian) state power when it was introduced into China in the 1980s by intellectuals who enthusiastically followed the writings of Hayek, Havel and Habermas. Therefore, for a long time, this notion was regarded by the Party as essentially Western and part of the bourgeois liberalism thought.

resistance is permitted and lawful to some extent (such actions range from marginally permitted to completely legitimate). Moreover, rightful resistance does subscribe to those officially endorsed values, norms and laws, and the government's commitment towards these symbols is often invoked by law-conscious resisters (O'Brien, 1996). Such resistance is no more than strategic participation in institutional politics based on a deft interpretation of the official discourse.

Regardless of the genuine intentions of rightful resisters, the willingness to apply rightful resistance embeds an implicit recognition of regime legitimacy – that is, the contestation is not that the regime is illegitimate, but that some elements within the regime ignore the laws and policies endorsed by the regime. In China, where people accord much higher legitimacy to the central government than local governments, many cases of protests against local authorities conform to this pattern. For example, people often cite central government provisions and even the Constitution when they protest against issues such as land grabs and official corruption. Indeed, allowing the use of rightful resistance should consolidate regime legitimacy, or at least enhance stability by turning people away from unlawful or even subversive forms of defiance. Such state-society interactions restore popular faith in the system even more if disputes are resolved successfully, because people recognise the efficacy of institutionalised channels of appeal.

As argued previously in relation to letters and petitions, ever since the Mao era the Party-state has been adept at utilising rightful resistance to strengthen regime legitimacy, as well as reinforcing the popular perception that state autonomy is high once grievances are brought to the central government. The same strategy was employed in the Deng era with the introduction of rule by law. In this regard, the risk of sanctioning rightful resistance was further reduced in the Jiang era, thanks to the simultaneous de-politicisation of the letters and petitions (the emphasis of which shifted from facilitating mass

mobilisation to addressing individual grievances) (Feng, 2012), and the steady enhancement of the legal framework over a decade. A much strengthened and law-based, predictable institution could ensure that issue-based contestations did not extend to the level of questioning regime legitimacy.

Moreover, from an effective governance perspective, the Jiang era central-local dynamics created an even more favourable environment in which the regime could take advantage of rightful resistance because of increased decentralisation and the resultant popular perception that local governments were doing worse in terms of complying with central government policies. For example, excess fees collected by financially-stretched local governments after the 1994 Tax Sharing Reform were the most protested issue in the countryside, during which peasants often cited central government documents and decrees on alleviating the burden on peasants when they were resisting wrongly-levied fees. Certainly, most of these protests were quelled promptly. But instead of relying exclusively on the ‘police response’, the Jiang-Zhu government launched high profile crackdowns on this malfeasance and gave a ‘policy response’ by introducing the ‘Tax for Fee’ reform (Cai, 2006). This paved the way for the total abolition of agriculture tax in 2006. The policy shift was much appreciated among peasants who felt that the central government policy response resonated with their rightful resistance, which reinforced the belief that the central government was highly legitimate and benevolent despite the fact that its subordinates were corrupt and predatory.

The usefulness of rightful resistance in strengthening regime legitimacy also echoed the ‘authoritarian resilience’ thesis which was developed based on observations in the 1990s (Nathan, 2003). The idea was that the application and innovation of input channels which facilitated institutionalised resistance would increase regime resilience. These input channels functioned as ‘lightning conductors’ (White, 1986:479), that diffused crises by

directing pressure into different sub-elements within the system so as to reduce resentment against the Party-state as a whole. Our analysis earlier on crisis displacement mechanisms also supports this view – converting a crisis *of* the system into a crisis *in* the system.

Overall, state-society relations in the Jiang era were more contentious. The uneasy experiment of unilateral openness (rapid economic liberalisation compared with little social and political liberalisation) was inherently contradictory. The post-Tiananmen Party-state made an in time response in 1992 to accommodate the rise of new economic and social needs, by co-opting civil society in the cities and stretching rightful resistance in the countryside respectively. Notwithstanding these efforts – which acquired additional resilience for the regime through decomposing the holistic challenge against the system into smaller and sector specific crises – they were interim measures that could at best maintain a ‘volcanic stability’ (He, 2003).

Accompanying mounting social pressure was the gradual tarnishing of the reform consensus in Chinese society. The perception that the reform had adverse effects on ordinary people’s living standards gained increasing popularity since the late 1990s, when the reform of SOEs and the marketisation of public services started. These reforms added complexity to the already changing demographics in the 1990s. As early as 1992, when economic reform was rejuvenated, the Chinese working population was more mobile, rendering the traditional household registration system (*hukou*) based provision of public services ineffective, and thus weakening the link between the state and the individual. People worked away from home (the ‘floating population’) often had to pay market prices or higher for public services, giving an impression that reforms had made everything more expensive. At the same time, the SOE reform, which led to tens of millions of workers becoming unemployed, had a profound impact on the CCP’s grassroots organisations. Many Party branches stopped functioning as a result of *danwei* closing down, and the

Party's connections with these former state employees were lost (Brady, 2012). At the turn of the 21st century, China's state sectors had all undergone efficiency-oriented reforms and therefore employed significantly less of the working population. The rest of the workforce, including those Party members working in the private sector where in most cases no Party branches had been established, had little regular contact with the Party. These were all signs of the Party's atrophy (Shambaugh, 2008b).

The composition of economic reform, political decentralisation and demographic change transformed the social identity of the Chinese working population from 'work unit person (*danwei ren*) to social person (*shehui ren*)' (Bray, 2005:157). Society was largely formed of atomised individuals instead of collective groupings. The dire consequence of this demographic change on the CCP could be best illustrated by the Falungong case. Ironically, a significant proportion of urban Falungong practitioners were former or current state sector employees, intellectuals and even Party members. Even after the government outlawed Falungong, its crackdown efforts were met with organised resistance. It revealed that it was more difficult for the CCP to mobilise the populace during a crisis in an era of Party atrophy. As such, when the CCP leadership transition occurred in 2002-2003 from Jiang to Hu, reasserting the Party to maintain stability became a priority for the new leadership.

3.5.4 The Hu Era and Maintaining Stability

When Hu Jintao took power in 2002, a number of indicators of social tension had reached very alarming levels, suggesting the state-society relations were qualitatively different from the Jiang era – they were so confrontational such that state-society relations under Hu could no longer be explained by the frameworks of corporatism and rightful resistance. For

example, China's Gini coefficient, a common measure of income inequality for which anything above 0.4 was an indication that the society in question was highly unequal, already stood at 0.412 in 2002. Furthermore, since then, the government has stopped releasing the official figure, while a widely circulated scholarly prediction suggested that the figure had already reached 0.61 in 2010 (China Daily, 2012). The number of 'mass incidents', China's official term for describing protests, increased tenfold from 8,700 in 1993 to 87,000 in 2005, and again the government stopped publishing subsequent figures (Fewsmith, 2009). A corresponding figure of government spending on internal security also rose sharply during the Hu era, which reached a whopping 701.8 billion Yuan in 2012 and exceeded China's defence expenditure for three consecutive years (Reuters, 2012). All these rising and alarming figures acted as a warning to the CCP that the social stability situation has become grave, and that the system has become overwhelmed by mountainous problems.

I. The Co-evolution of the Internet and Civil Society

Meanwhile, the widespread use of the Internet seemed to aggravate these tensions. The impact of the Internet on state control of information was previously discussed, and here the emphasis is on the confluence of newly available means of communication and changing state-society relations. The Internet and civil society are inherently complementary – even more so in authoritarian states, where channels of both expression and mobilisation are restricted. Therefore, what Yang Guobing (2003) found in China has been a progressive co-evolution of the Internet and civil society, in which they favourably underpinned the development and diffusion of each other in the larger society, and facilitated the transformation of an incipient civil society to a more mature one through

democratic uses of the Internet. In addition, unlike citizen appeals in the past where autonomous organisations would only sustain temporarily within the lifespan of the initial grievance (Luehrmann, 2003), the Internet empowered citizens who benefited from the ease of continued communication, and thus kept pushing their demands on to the government. For our three case studies, SARS survivors, parents who lost their children in the Sichuan earthquake, and parents whose babies became ill because of drinking contaminated milk, each had an online community that periodically appealed to the government for financial assistance and to the wider society for sympathy. Moreover, the Internet had a huge mobilisation potential to alter the policy agenda by quickly increasing the number of stakeholders into tens of millions owing to its interactivity and instantaneity. In the Hu era, there had been famous cases where public pressure led to changing public policy or a reversal of policy decisions. In June 2003, facing continual and powerful public pressure, the State Council abolished the Custody and Repatriation System altogether after a tragic story circulated on the Internet about Sun Zhigang, who was a university graduate from Hubei looking for work in Guangzhou and was beaten to death for failing to show his temporary resident permit (Wang, 2008). In the same year, nationalist netizens were outraged when they learnt that China might have been planning to import Shinkansen technologies from Japan to build the Beijing-Shanghai High Speed Rail, one of the most costly projects in the PRC's history. A petition was widely circulated on the Internet and the signatures were reportedly sent to the government, resulting in the Ministry of Railways (MOR)'s decision not to import Shinkansen technologies, despite the fact that the Japanese bid was the most competitive (South Reviews, 2003).

Indeed, the government tended to reject the tendency of public pressure-driven policy making, not only owing to its preference for expert and scientific decision making (which all rational bureaucracies would prefer), but also because it was still at the early stage of

experimenting consultative deliberation that was pretty much elites based. It could find itself in a very defensive position if it refused to respond to popular demand when pressed. As such, it came as no surprise that the government put continuous efforts into Internet censorship to prevent a sensitive public event or incident from interrupting the existing policy agenda. Or, when the event became too big to cover up, the government would try to mould the public opinion in favour of itself so as to support its controversial and unpopular responses. Notwithstanding this censorship and manipulation, sensitive occurrences that garnered substantial public support nationwide have been happening more frequently in recent years, particularly during mass incidents when the public outcry against the government's reaction was brought to boiling point. Examples include the 2005 Taishi incident in Guangdong, where local government suppressed villagers' attempts to remove corrupted village leaders from office, and the 2008 Weng'an incident in Guizhou, where a popular protest escalated into a riot after local police mishandled a case involving a girl's death.

In both crises the central government exhibited some degree of sympathy towards the local people and allowed limited media access. But it was slow to reverse the local, heavy-handed response, during which period both crises became national events and caught international media attention. In such circumstances, the central government was cautious and hesitant to intervene directly because the Internet was a double-edged sword. Whilst successfully resolving such crises through direct intervention would lend the central government extra credibility before a national online audience, netizens would wonder why such appropriate responses, which came directly from above, could not constitute a precedent for similar crises elsewhere? This was exactly where the government's fear lay: because crises like these were so commonplace, it worried about a 'ratcheting up' of such

responses forced by popular pressure which required systemic political liberalisation, rather than ad hoc and one-off solutions.

At a deeper level, this caution reflected the Party-state's calculation on the pace of political reform for which it sought to strike a delicate balance between allowing limited popular political participation whilst ensuring the Party's firm grip on power. This predicament led to the CCP's ultimate concern over the nature of stability. As for the pace of political reform, for three consecutive PCs (16th, 17th and 18th), the same contradictory and vague adjectives of 'active and prudent' were used to describe how to proceed with political reform (Xinhua, 2002; 2007; 2012) – a somehow appropriate reflection of there were no major breakthroughs in political reform in the Hu era. The same contradictory mentality lay with the understanding of stability – the debate over static stability versus dynamic stability has been going on for years without a decisive conclusion.

II. Static Stability versus Dynamic Stability

Being able to provide stability while the country was navigating through one crisis after another caused by turbulent socio-economic transformations, has become an increasingly important source of legitimacy for the CCP. However, there was considerable disagreement over what would constitute or sustain genuine stability.

There have been two mainstream competing discourses of stability: static and dynamic stability. Static stability has its roots in the Chinese cultural inclination of avoiding chaos, placing a heavy emphasis on apparent public order (for example, no open protests). In contrast, dynamic stability is marked by its adherence to the legal-rational principle of procedural justice, implying that although the process of contestation may seem 'chaotic', the outcome is nonetheless stable because stability is derived from the inherent objectivity

of rightful procedures. In other words, although both discourses stress stability as the ultimate outcome, their respective approaches to attaining it are very different. Static stability is obsessed with a pre-determined equilibrium, and any deviation from this fixed equilibrium is considered instability. Maintaining the status quo regardless of changes in context is therefore the top priority. On the other hand, dynamic stability is more adaptable in that it does not specify an equilibrium in advance, and often represents a shift from one equilibrium to another as a result of a change in demographic and socio-political conditions. Furthermore, such shifts of equilibrium are considered legitimate as long as the processes and channels through which they occur are government sanctioned. In the words of Yu Keping (2006a), static stability is about ‘blocking’, i.e. crude suppression, whereas dynamic stability is about ‘channelling’, i.e. negotiation and deliberation. In everyday governance, proponents of static stability tend to resort to force and quell any sign of disobedience at all costs. Proponents of dynamic stability are ready to keep open existing channels of inclusion – such as all forms of rightful resistance – when disputes arise, and they are more willing to expand the existing mechanisms of interest articulation, such as the introductions of public hearings and opinion surveys (Li, 2009).

III. Contrasting Views on Civil Society

The understanding on the role of civil society is tightly linked to the dichotomy of stability. Proponents of dynamic stability regard civil society as one of the prerequisites of its existence, whereas proponents of static stability are highly suspicious towards it, owing to its self-organising capacity. Since the Hu era, there have been two competing views towards civil society, corresponding to the debate on dynamic versus static stability.

The first view is the positive-sum view on civil society. Some liberal Party scholars argue that a healthy civil society will contribute to dynamic stability. For them, people's involvement in a self-organised civil society results in the training of various 'civilities': tolerance, sympathy, volunteering, community consciousness and the habit to reason and compromise when disputes arise. These qualities are crucial for China's 'farewell to revolution' – transforming from a society based on class struggle to a more fraternal society (Gao and Yuan, 2008; Perry, 2007). It is believed that a tightly controlled society is intrinsically more unstable than a society with the ability to self-organise (Gao and Yuan, 2008).

From the social equality perspective, these scholars believe that one effective approach to contain any further polarisation within the Chinese society is the nurture of a civil society where the social stratum in the middle, i.e. the middle class³⁵, forms its backbone. Like their western counterparts, these Chinese academics consider the middle class as the stabiliser of transformation: rational, educated and favouring gradualist political views. As long as this stratum grows larger by absorbing members from lower strata, China's transformation will not be derailed by polarisation (He, 2004). It is believed that this process of upward social mobility will help the Chinese society to transform from a 'pyramid shape' to an 'olive shape', where middle income earners count for the majority (Wen, 2010).

In addition, a functioning civil society relatively autonomous to the state-government system and the market-enterprise system, will benefit China's transformation through the buffering of various contradictions – it acts as an intermediary between the needs of the state, the market and the people. Politically, it will temper the conflict between the lack of channels for interest articulation within the existing structure and people's expression of

³⁵In the Chinese context, a variant term, the 'middle-income stratum' has often been used in order to detach the politically independent connotation associated with the term 'middle class', thus only stressing the economic status of this group.

their increasingly complex interests. Economically, it will narrow the gap between the state's macro-level management imperative and micro-level reality. In the societal sphere, civic organisations will provide public services in areas overlooked by the government, and therefore resolve social dislocations caused by the ongoing transformation. Yu Keping (2008:20) thus concludes that this emerging social realm is playing an important role in 'perfecting the market economy, changing the role of the government, expanding popular participation, nurturing grassroots democracy and open government, improving social management and stimulating charitable work'.

These well argued cases for civil society also echo the Hu era discourse on building a harmonious society – they overlap in their emphasis on justice and how conflicts should be resolved (Wu, 2006). Yu Keping even contends that 'There won't be a genuine harmonious society without a healthy civil society' (Beijing Daily, 2011).

The second view is the zero-sum view on civil society. While the notion of civil society seems compatible with Party goals, more hardline Party apparatchiks are concerned with its liberalising implication. The normative theory of democratisation predicts that a large middle class constitutes one of the most important prerequisites for democratisation. This is true at least with the modernisation approach (Potter, 1997), as supported by evidence in South Korea and Taiwan. In addition, the Habermas conception of civil society, which stresses an autonomous and even oppositional role of the society vis-a-vis the state, is very influential in the Chinese academia. The interest in civil society by Chinese academics themselves also largely originates in the supposed contribution of civil society activities to the collapse of communism in Eastern and Central Europe (Teets, 2009). Such dire consequences are what the Party fears most.

Party hardliners therefore dismiss the notion of civil society as ill-intentioned. The Secretary General of the CCP's Central Politics and Law Commission goes so far as

accusing civil society of being ‘a trap western countries designed for China...we should prevent ill-minded civic organisations from flourishing’ (Zhou, 2011a). For Party apparatchiks, the Party and its extensive array of quasi Party-state organisations should enjoy an undisputed monopoly on intermediating and articulating societal interests, but civil society develops alternative channels for such functions. It is therefore in direct competition with the Party in terms of attaining credentials for resolving conflict. Moreover, civil society has a different set of agendas to those of the Party, and its association thus encroaches upon the Party’s mobilisation capacity organisationally – the Party has been wary of anyone else developing an organisational structure that has the potential capacity for collective action, and will never allow such organisations to become involved with political appeals.

Therefore, for Party conservatives, responding to new social demands does not equate to the rolling-back of the state frontier and the rolling-forward of society, or the devolution of the state. Rather, it means extending the reach of government social control and government-run public services, in which consolidating ‘mass work’ is the key (Zhou, 2011a). In their view, the assumed Habermas dichotomy between state and society is simply bogus – the burgeoning societal sphere should not be too autonomous, but ought to be affiliated with the traditional Party-state structure, if not be part of it. In other words, the mass work-based state corporatism model must expand its traditional frontiers in order to fill this new political vacuum where associational life flourishes. ‘Civic organisations should be incorporated into the Party-state led system of social management’ (Zhou, 2011a).

IV. From Harmonious Society to Maintaining Stability

In the entire Hu era, the Party-state was searching for an up-to-date strategy of social control in order to maintain stability. Nevertheless, there was a noticeable difference as to which discourse of stability (and the associated view on civil society) was more influential at a specific point. A periodisation might be useful here, with the Beijing Olympics in 2008 as the watershed that divided the Hu era.

In the early Hu era of 2003-2008, development in state-society relations largely conformed to the notion of dynamic stability as well as to the positive-sum view of civil society. New mechanisms encouraging deliberation and consultation were introduced into everyday politics, not to mention the large scale popular participation and the demonstration of official accountability during the SARS crisis and the Sichuan earthquake (during which participation in civil society flourished in particular). The introduction of the concept of 'harmonious society' into Party ideology in 2006 echoed the notion of dynamic stability in the emphasis on (socialist) democracy and rule by law, social justice and rights protection (Xinhua, 2006). It was a reflection of the Party's commitment to maintain benign and engaging relations with the people. Interestingly, this concept first appeared in the 2004 Party resolution on consolidating the CCP's governing capacity which, despite endorsing the people's rights to 'democratic elections, democratic policy making, democratic governance and democratic supervision', also emphasised that all these mechanisms contributing to dynamic stability must take place under the auspices of the CCP (Xinhua, 2004a). Indeed, the Party considered the perfecting of these dynamic input institutions as one of the goals it had to achieve in order to govern well for the people. Starting in January 2005, the CCP launched the Campaign to Maintain the Advanced Nature of Communist Party Members, an important dimension of which was to inject some system dynamics by broadening its ways of keeping in contact with and listening to the

people (Xinhua, 2006). In a sense, Party leadership at the time at least considered dynamic stability to be instrumentally useful.

The late Hu era from the Olympics onwards (indeed, since the Tibet unrest in March 2008) marked a deterioration in state-society relations in that static stability rose to prominence. Maintaining (static) stability had been the dominant theme since then. In fact, the abbreviation of maintaining stability, *wei wen*, was a term first used by China's paramilitary forces in reference to emergency situations (New York Times, 2012), and it had often been used in the extreme context of anti-terrorism rather than referring to resolving everyday social tensions³⁶. Despite the term's obvious repressive and antagonistic tinge, its usage had surged in state media since 2008, whereas, during roughly the same period, the rate of appearances of the term 'harmonious society' had decreased sharply (New York Times, 2012). The term was frequently applied in the civilian domain to describe non-antagonistic social tensions which, in effect, increased antagonism. Moreover, in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring, Hu proposed the notion of 'new social management' in which he reiterated the vague notion of 'Party-state led rights protection mechanism', but at the same time specifically stressed the importance of 'creative' ways to manage the floating population and civic organisations, and reinforcing public order and moral education. In particular, for the first time, he called for enhancing the management of the 'virtual society' – the Internet (Xinhua, 2011c). These palpable changes in Party discourse underpinned the shift from dynamic to static stability.

It was interesting to note why things changed at the time of the Olympics. Many believed that the Olympics would promote democracy in China through its further opening up to the rest of the world, an effect similar to that in South Korea after its holding of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Such expectations were also partly the reason why the international

³⁶ A good illustration can be found in the PLA Daily at http://chn.chinamil.com.cn/yx/2010-01/10/content_4522826.htm

community endorsed Beijing to host the Games (Human Rights Watch, 2012). However, the Chinese leadership might have perceived it differently in the run up to the Games. Crises such as the Tibet riot and the Sichuan earthquake, where international media gained access to the affected regions by taking advantage of the loosened restrictions on journalists³⁷, also allowed these media outlets to cover both events extensively and in more detail than ever before. A significant proportion of their reports presented China in a negative light, which was unintended by the Chinese government, and put it in a defensive position before the international community but also before its domestic audience (in the case of the school collapse scandal after the quake). What the Chinese leadership found was probably that this was the consequence of being unprecedentedly open, the fallout of which the current system could not afford. China's emphasis on stability thus turned to static stability. Restrictive measures were in place to keep out domestic and international 'trouble makers'. For instance, there were no protests approved during the Olympics, despite more than 70 applications and a designated protest zone (BBC, 2008a)³⁸. China's visa policy for foreigners was also suddenly tightened in the run up to the Opening Ceremony (New York Times, 2008a). All this happened despite Beijing's commitment to openness, at a moment that could best showcase it. As a result, instead of being a catalyst for political liberalisation or contesting the status quo, the Beijing Olympics turned out to be an 'acceleration and concentration of status quo' (Pelling and Dill, 2009:2). This was best illustrated by numerous calls from the Chinese leadership at the time to wage and win a 'People's War' on safeguarding the Beijing Olympics³⁹. Despite the deployment of a strong security force, the Maoist-style 'People's War' swept through Beijing, other hosting

³⁷ After the Tibet riot, foreign journalists were initially denied access but later allowed into the region on a government-arranged media tour; in the case of the Sichuan earthquake, the restriction was minimal from the beginning but tightened later.

³⁸ This policy was a step backward in terms of openness comparing to China's behaviour in the past. For example, during the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women hosted in Beijing, protests were allowed. China's external environment then was also considerably worse than in 2008.

³⁹ More than one million entries can be found in Google when searching 'Olympics security + People's War' in Chinese (*aoyun anbao + renmin zhanzheng*).

cities and places where the Olympics Torch Relay passed. Party members, government employees and retired residents wearing red arm bands patrolled the streets – a scene rarely seen for decades reoccurred.

Two simultaneous developments contributed to the Party-state's increasing assertiveness after the Games. One was the international community's praise of the flawless organisation of the Games, which led to a growing complacency within China about the Chinese model. The other development was that much of the international media scrutiny on China shifted away as the Games closed. The Chinese leadership seemed to draw the wrong lesson from holding the Olympics: that maintaining static stability, exemplified by monolithic organisation and no unsightly occurrences during the Olympics, was an effective way to govern the country⁴⁰. In this sense, the Olympics marked a turning point at which the old reflex of a totalitarian state was reactivated⁴¹. Furthermore, with the obsession with static stability, increased surveillance on the population during the Olympics lasted well beyond the Olympics, and these restrictive measures have been implemented elsewhere. For example, security checks on the metro were first introduced in Beijing in June 2008, but the same practice was introduced to and made routine in all major cities with a metro system. The 'Eagle Eye' system – panoramic closed circuit cameras used to monitor crime but also to detect instantly anti-government behaviour (such as large gatherings) which was first installed in Beijing before the Olympics – has also been installed nationwide in recent years. One of the Olympics' legacies was the rise in influence of China's internal security apparatus, as well as the rapid growth in government spending to finance all these new policing measures (Economist, 2011).

⁴⁰ The requirement of no complaints against local governments filed in Beijing has long been a factor according to which local leaders' performance on maintaining stability is assessed. So no protests and the like are important for local leaders' political careers.

⁴¹ Here totalitarian state in the post-Mao context means (*zongtixing guojia*) (the fact that the state 'encompasses' every aspect of social and political life) rather than (*jiquan guojia*) (the standard understanding of totalitarian police state in the western sense). The former merely describes the reach of the state whereas the latter emphasises the state's repressive propensity, with the latter having a much stronger ideologically pejorative connotation.

Accompanying increased surveillance and sophistication in social control practices was the Party's organisational reassertion. As mentioned earlier, in the Jiang era, many grassroots Party branches did not function properly owing to economic restructuring, and Party members within these became 'rootless'; therefore, Hu was determined to recover this lost grassroots capacity for the CCP. This was not only to strengthen the CCP's leading position in social and economic life, but to pre-empt civil society activities that might seek to take advantage of Party atrophy. As a result, the reach of the Party for the first time extended beyond the state and public sector (Jing, 2011). The CCP has instructed that Party work should be carried out in all 'new' economic and social organisations and those large organisations should establish their own Party branches⁴², a precautionary measure aimed at preventing these organisations from getting out of hand.

In addition, the Party-state sought to absorb typical civil society arrangements into its sphere of influence, for example, by directly operating an extensive network of volunteers. This strategy was first implemented during the Olympics where all those mobilised in the mass campaign were called 'volunteers'. Such an arrangement was believed to set a good example and the same strategy has been repeated in subsequent major national events, not limited to sporting events. The conventional western understanding was that volunteering activities were decentralised in nature; to the contrary, the CCP managed to incorporate volunteers into its mobilisation vehicle, and to command this force in a top-down fashion. Ironically, it was not the civil society but the CCP and the Communist Youth League (CYL) that ran China's largest army of volunteers, who were also the best trained.

V. Politicising the Legal System

⁴² New economic organisations comprise all non-state enterprises, including foreign enterprises; new social organisations include all professional associations, NGOs, foundations and community based groups. They are 'new' in that they have not been substantively penetrated by the Party so far.

One of Yang Guobin's (2003) insights into the co-evolution of the Internet and civil society is that political control strategies used by the Party-state to tame the media will be similar to those applied to restrain civil society, and vice versa. As we discussed earlier, the media realm was already repoliticised in the late Hu era, and it was therefore not surprising to see a strong propensity in the Party-state to politicise the legal system in the same period.

This wave of politicisation took two forms. One was to strengthen the Party's control over rule by law. Although rule by law was still being upheld as the fundamental principle to governance, more conditionality was added. This was clearly evident in the Hu era Party discourse on the relationship between the Party and the law. In late 2007, Hu Jintao stressed in a judge and procurator joint conference that judicial work must serve 'three utmost priorities' – namely, giving 'utmost priority to the Party's causes, to the people's interests, and to the Constitution and the law' (Xinhua, 2008I). This new rhetoric was cited many times by leaders in the Politics and Law apparatus and had significant influence on the handling of crises since 2008, especially social unrests. Later in September 2010, Zhou Benshun, Secretary General of the Central Politics and Law Commission, further elaborated upon the three utmost priorities by making the following remark:

We must always maintain the unification of powers (executive, legislature and judiciary powers), and not the separation of powers; always maintain enforcing law for the sake of the people, and not for the sake of judiciary supremacy; always maintain running the country according to the law, and not insist on the law's omnipotence; always maintain fairness and justice, and not make western-style superficial equality; always maintain the harmonisation of legal, social and political effects, and not just the legal effect; always maintain empirical standards, and not make western double standards. (Legal Profession, 2010)

In fact, this explanatory rhetoric above did not significantly contradict the rule by law principle as it was understood in the Chinese context – that was, a harmonisation of the Party's leadership, the people's rule and running the country according to the law.

However, it differed from the rule by law norm in the Deng and Jiang eras in that it represented an inclination to politicise (as opposed to professionalise) judiciary work (Lam, 2008). According to the new rhetoric: the Party's dominance was enlarged and its goals were given an overriding importance; the people's interests (which the Party claimed to represent) followed; and rule by law was downgraded from an ideal of better mode of governance, to a mere tool in the Party's arsenal of governance strategies. This move marked a further departure from an independent judiciary which could have helped to increase regime resilience.

Measures were taken to reflect this latest change in discourse. Political education campaigns were launched in courts and procuratorates for the purpose of enhancing the CCP's 'thoughts, political and organisational' leadership in the legal system (Zhou, 2011b). Party building work was also carried out in 'new social organisations' of lawyers' associations and law firms. In 2008, lawyers were given a new identity of 'socialist legal workers', which was awkwardly similar to the 1980s definition of 'state legal workers' that had been used to describe lawyers before its use was discontinued in 1997. They were also told to place their highest loyalty in the Party instead of in their clients (Zang, 2010).

In terms of day to day legal proceedings, the Party's influence rose and sometimes its discretion became ultimate. Although rule by law in China has always been conditioned upon sustaining Party rule, and therefore western judiciary independence is not applicable, it was the norm in the Deng and Jiang eras that the Party should be refrained from taking 'concrete leadership' in courts and intervening in court proceedings (Keith, 1991). Substantive Party involvement in a number of court proceedings concerning the school collapse scandal after the earthquake and the milk scandal represented another backslide in the rule by law record.

The second form of politicising the legal system was the obstruction, or even suppression, of rightful resistance. In the late Hu era, disadvantaged members of the society found it increasingly difficult to resolve their grievances through legal means because the Politics and Law apparatus frequently restricted their access to intra-institution and state sanctioned means of appeal. The preoccupation with static stability made the state reluctant to distinguish rightful resistance from those subverting activities in the guise of safeguarding one's legal rights. In national crises of the earthquake and the milk scandal, the Party-state blocked attempts by the disadvantaged to start the judiciary process and collective actions were banned. In smaller crises and local social unrest, the use of extra-judicial or even unlawful measures to quell discontent or 'disharmonious elements', was not rare. In light of heightened tensions, in September 2010 Hu called upon colleagues in the Politburo to improve social harmony by referring back to the classic Maoist rhetoric of 'correctly handle contradictions among the people' (Xinhua, 2010b). However, this urge largely failed to change the repressive behaviour of the Politics and Law apparatus at the local level, which often viewed any challenges to static stability as antagonistic contradictions.

Overall, state-society relations in the Hu era deteriorated. Stagnation in political reform led to little progress in rule by law and human rights. Certainly, as weak paramount leaders, Hu-Wen were in an unfavourable position to make any breakthroughs in their decade in power, especially after 2008 when most large crises originated internally, which lent the internal security establishment growing clout. The uncertain prospect of the highly competitive leadership transition in 2012 perhaps also frightened the incumbent leadership into inertia, and to be satisfied with (or had to accept) the status quo of an 'illusion of stability that was really reflective of a rotting system' (Shambaugh, 2008:178).

Despite a brief political opening around the 2003-4 SARS crisis, the rest of the Hu era saw the Party-state strengthening its control over society. Rather than heading down a path of incremental liberalisation that characterised the Deng and Jiang eras, crises such as those we are examining in this thesis – as well as the political contraction justified in the name of countering these crises – led to the revival of Maoist social control, both in a totalitarian mentality and in organisational tactics. In this respect, crisis enabled the ‘survival and return’ of the old reflex (Streeck and Thelen, 2005). This backslide inevitably collided with the rapidly modernising social reality, which led to the CCP’s machinery for preserving stability operating in a crisis mode after early 2008. In static stability-oriented crisis management, the Party-state pushed the public-private boundary in the form of suppressing civil society and limiting civil and legal rights, and these restrictive measures had a tendency to become routine. Rightful resistance was more often viewed as an antagonistic threat rather than as ‘contradictions among the people’ that needed mediation rather than coercion.

The consequence of the Party-state’s ‘paranoia’ with static stability was grave, as overreactions to popular contentions and resorting to force as the default option, have already led to larger crises. Since 2011, defiance activities that resorted to open violence instead of rightful resistance seem to have been on the rise, and this type of extreme incidents – which, in the past, often occurred in the countryside – now happen more often in major cities (Zheng, 2012). If this momentum continues, there is a considerable risk that ‘stability above everything’ will eventually become ‘everything crushes stability’ (Qian, 2010), meaning that temporarily suppressed contentions join forces and erupt at the same time.

It was not until the 2011-12 Wukan incident in Guangdong that there was a brief departure from this momentum. In this incident, villagers staged a protest lasting several

months against corrupted officials. The protest was initially suppressed but eventually resolved peacefully when the Guangdong provincial government intervened by supporting villagers to vote in a fair election. The election was run according to the election law and was monitored by representatives from the government, the media and civil society, which marked an attempt to shift the dominating social management paradigm from maintaining static stability towards creating dynamic stability. On a separate note, following the Bo Xilai and Cheng Guangcheng crises, the Politics and Law apparatus has been blamed for having had too much power, and the new head of the Central Politics and Law Commission no longer had a seat in the PSC when the 18th PC was convened in November 2012. Whether this temporary reconciliation will sustain under Xi Jinping to become a genuine paradigm shift, is still open to question.

3.6 Policy Making

This section uses the evolution of policy making under normal politics since 1949 to contextualise crisis decision making under the CCP. As stated in the introduction, if the essence of normal politics policy making can be well captured, crisis decision making can then be more or less predictable. In addition, the foundations of China's policy making superstructures – such as the Party and state institutions as well as policy making norms and rules – were laid in the early PRC era and these have largely remained throughout different leadership eras. Changes that have already taken place tend to be evolutionary and incremental. For this reason, it is important to discern the underlying path dependency. Since the existing literature on policy making in the PRC is plentiful, and owing to this

study's focus on crisis, in this section we only review those distinctive characteristics developed under each leadership era and discuss their legacies.

3.6.1 The Mao Era and Factionalised Totalitarianism

The popular perception of Mao's China was that of a monolithic country where the entire state apparatus was under the total control of Mao. Indeed, Mao's leadership was pivotal in shaping Chinese politics at the time. It was especially so when it came to decisions regarding external relations (Breslin, 2008b), as we have seen in his deciding to enter the Korean War and inviting Nixon for the icebreaking visit to China two decades later. Nevertheless, when it came to major domestic issues, far from having absolute dominance, Mao as the paramount leader was constrained from time to time by other founding fathers of the Party in advancing his policies. Including Mao, there were between thirty and forty men who made all the major decisions at the top through consensus building (Nathan, 1973; 1997). There were sometimes fierce debates regarding major policies.

Fingar (1980a) argued that policy making in the Mao era normally involved the formation and realignment of coalitions built around common or compatible stands on a number of policy issues. But this finding tended to be more applicable to bureaucratic politics at operational, budgetary and functional levels (Fingar, 1980b). Nathan instead argued that policy making in the Mao era was characterised by factional politics, especially at the top level. But the formation of factions were in flux because the alliances were formed on the basis of personal exchange ties in which personal prestige, position and contact within the system were of more importance than formal authority (Nathan, 1973). And, once the common enemies were defeated, the faction began to fall apart because of

the inherent flexibility and fluidity in factional politics in terms of membership (Nathan, 1973), and the diverse interests of the members (Breslin, 2008b).

If the centre was far from a monolithic bloc, the central-local relations deviated further from the unitary impression of the Chinese state. There was no doubt that in the Mao era China had a very strong capacity for national mobilisation, and the extensive array of mobilisation vehicles enabled the central state to penetrate its territories and logistically disseminate decisions, even to the remotest corners of this massive country. However, this did not necessarily mean that policies initiated at the centre would be fully implemented at all levels. To the contrary, the multilayered structure of the Chinese state more often than not encouraged incomppliance or partial compliance at the local level, because the power structure of the state apparatus was made up of a 'five-level hierarchy of dyadic principal-agent relationships' (Wedeman, 2001:62), which created conditions that enabled cadres to manipulate central directives for local and self interests.

Within these multilayer principal-agent relationships and over-complex hierarchy, local officials had the incentives to prevent negative information from reaching the central government, and the culture of exaggerating the good while obscuring the bad prevailed. This could lead to wrong decisions being made by the central government because of misinformation. In the Great Leap Forward that ended tragically with a great famine, Mao was misled into believing that there were super-high grain yields as a result of local manipulation, misreporting and false reporting from the lowest administrative unit on the ground all the way up to the centre. This problem of misinformation is the legacy of the Mao era which has continued into the present day, as we will see in the SARS crisis in the next chapter.

In the Mao era, the system for policy making and information processing was closed, and there were very few channels through which policy inputs could be transmitted into

this system. A crucial source of advice was from the ‘masterminds’ within the Party. Although there were few professionalised research activities in the Mao era, idea exchanges between individual policy advisors and policy makers were more frequent. These advisors were senior staff who had already served in military, intelligence or economic administrative units and were very experienced. They offered their advice through a variety of internal channels, usually using interpersonal networks rather than following formal organisational procedures so as to get quicker access to senior leaders, in the expectation that their advice would be adopted. This ‘inside access’ model played an important role in shaping the leadership’s decisions regarding major strategic issues, e.g. the deployment of forces in the Korean War and the establishment of diplomatic relations with West Germany (Wang, 2008).

In addition, the state media also played its part in transmitting information into the system for policy making. State media was often considered a transmission belt which disseminated top directives to every locality on the ground. But it also performed some monitoring and supervisory functions resembling those of an Imperial Censorate. Its relative organisational independence from local governments enabled it to act as extra eyes and ears of the centre. For example, the Xinhua News Agency published its ‘classified references’ for a readership that consisted only of leaders above the ministerial level. These internal secret dispatches often carried sensitive topics about which the leadership should be informed but which were politically too controversial to be made public (Chen, 2005). In the Mao era, there were very few channels through which ordinary people could make their voice heard throughout the policy process. But the classified references system still occasionally made grievances on the ground known to the highest leadership, even though the coverage of these issues was limited and the selection criteria was very subjective.

In sum, policy making under Mao was highly leader-centric, and few channels existed to transmit ideas into the system from outside, because the near totalitarian state encompassed everything. As such, most of the interest articulation occurred within the state, especially at the central level. There were a number of policy making characteristics developed under Mao – namely, factionalism, the local manipulation of central policies (which then evolved into fragmented authoritarianism in the Deng era and into de facto federalism since Jiang), the inside access model of consultation and the classified reference system. These Maoist legacies have continued to shape policy making after Mao, and many of the characteristics of policy making in the present day are more or less rooted in the Mao era.

3.6.2 The Deng Era and Fragmented Authoritarianism

The most prominent characteristic of policy making in the Deng era was ‘fragmented authoritarianism’ (Lieberthal, 1992), which remained the best explanatory framework of policy making in the reform era (Mertha, 2009). The formation of fragmented authoritarianism could be attributed to declining strongman politics and more dynamic central-local relations.

At the level of elite politics, the paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, had less personal authority compared to Mao, as the regime shifted its legitimating base from personalised revolutionary utopian to the more secular criterion of performance (Zhao, 2009). Without an undisputed vision for the future, an ideological fissure appeared. The debate revolved around what constituted legitimate reform. The left, led by prominent statisticians and economic planners in the Mao era, such as Chen Yun and Li Xiannian, were reluctant to implement market reforms. They wanted more or less to continue the development strategy that

emerged from the First Five Year Plan in the early 1950s, and believed that China's economic difficulties could be fixed by modernising the planned economy and making it 'more scientific' (Breslin, 2008b; Leonard, 2008). The right, led by reformist leaders such as Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, attributed China's problems to the incomplete transition – halfway between planned and market economy, and between 'rule of man' and 'rule of law'. They contended that the solution was to introduce more reforms.

This divide between the left and the right gave rise to the loose formation of two confrontational factions accordingly, which characterised elite politics in the Deng era. The struggle at the top was reflected in the not infrequent U-turns on policies, or 'letting go' followed by 'tightening up' cycles. In light of this tension, Deng Xiaoping promoted his own 'no debate' (*bu zhenglun*) thesis. He argued that China's fundamental problem was its impoverishment and backwardness. Rather than debating on ideological lines, which would make things complicated and waste precious time, China should pursue whatever means to promote economic development regardless of the ideological implications. As a result of Deng's pragmatism in striking a balance, all policy outcomes ended up somewhere between what the left and the right desired.

More fragmentation occurred below the elite level and within bureaucratic politics. According to Deng's regional development logic, some people and some regions should be allowed to prosper before others. Such logic restructured the matrix of power and increased the discretionary authority of provinces, which encouraged them to innovate their own ways of development and governance in order to spur rapid growth (Lieberthal, 1995). Thus, provinces were motivated to compete with each other for resources and preferential treatment, as were central ministries which controlled the allocation of these resources. As a result, the bureaucratic empire was even more difficult to coordinate vertically and

horizontally, and the entire system was considered by Lieberthal (1992) to be a 'fragmented authoritarianism'.

To make this complex system work more effectively, there were many negotiations between the centre and localities, and among localities themselves. The prevalence of these informal arrangements inevitably eroded central authority and reduced its ability to impose its will on local authorities. Nevertheless, such negotiations, bargaining and consensus-building processes softened the rigid institutional set-up. Mutual accommodation made the system better adapted for the changing economic landscape. At the same time, local authorities were more vocal and courageous in defending their own interests in competition with the central authority (by taking advantage of factionalism at the centre, if necessary) and other local authorities. More skilful and committed local leaders could really make a difference. The new central-local dynamics created a more viable channel for local interests to be represented and for local talents and initiatives to be transmitted into policy making at the centre. For example, local experiments and experience in Wenzhou and Shenzhen were transformed into the system for nationwide implementation thereafter. These input dynamics illuminated the nature of reform: it was not only reform from above but also reform from below (Parris, 1993).

As China opened up to the outside world and as interests became more diverse from within, professional research activities have become increasingly important in policy making. In the Deng era, the orientation of policy making gradually shifted from ideology and party lines centred towards scientific and technical based. Research institutes were established to provide valuable policy inputs to the leadership. For example, researchers at the Chinese Rural Development Research Group conducted field investigations and gathered first-hand data that helped the central government in formulating a series of policy documents on countryside and agricultural development (Wang, 2008).

Nevertheless, these research activities had apparent shortcomings. Many researchers lacked the knowledge and methodological capacity necessary for systematic research and analysis. In addition, political imperatives did from time to time override institutional policy consulting. As the radical and controversial price reform of 1988 manifested, once policies were initiated by political leaders with firm determination, policy advisors had little choice but to design the detailed policy accordingly. Thus, the influence of the academic circle in policy making under Deng varied greatly depending on the case and the circumstances.

Deng's opening up to the outside world not only included being receptive to foreign capital and technology, but also learning from foreign experience and institutions. Deng was interested in foreign development models and their applicability to China. He seemed convinced that authoritarian regimes were more efficient than democratic ones in pursuing economic development, and that development could be uninterrupted only if economic reforms were implemented before political reforms, as the experiences of Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and other industrialising countries of Southeast Asia showed (Wrage, 1998). The establishment of Special Economic Zones and the promotion of rule by law (instead of rule of law) in China exemplified this learning from policies from abroad.

In sum, policy making under Deng became more institutionalised owing to the regularisation of normal politics. The locus of policy making was in the process of shifting from the centre to the provinces, which resulted not only in fragmentation but in breathing space for more diverse interests and policy innovation. In terms of the policy process, more actors were involved and policy inputs were increasingly professional. The legacies of the Deng era were rich. Fragmented authoritarianism continues to characterise normal politics in the present day, and sometimes even during crises. In addition, Deng's 'no debate' thesis remains the most debated topic in the intellectual life of China. As unsolved

institutional and structural problems have accumulated since Deng, people from a wide political spectrum have been questioning the legitimacy of ‘no debate’ and competing with each other for alternative agendas.

3.6.3 The Jiang Era and Managed Corporatism

Since Jiang and the CCP’s ‘third generation’ of leaders came to power, Chinese politics has entered a new era in which an increasing proportion of decision making has been taking place in the context of normal politics instead of in informal, strongman politics. The retreat of ideology as the fundamental basis of legitimacy and the remarkable diversification of interests in Chinese society facilitated the emergence of normal politics. ‘Normal’ meant that leaders in their conduct of politics were confined by institutions and rules, rather than by ideological dogma (Teiwes, 2002). The lack of revolutionary prestige among the third generation also implied that it was not possible for the paramount leader, Jiang, to dominate over his Politburo colleagues who possessed comparable bureaucratic experience. Although installed as the ‘core’, this status linked him more to the stabilising and centrist role he was expected to play in order to unite the Party. In everyday policy making, the norm of collective leadership reasserted itself and Jiang was merely the first among equals (Tsou, 1998).

Deng’s reform left the third generation with a complex and unprecedented mix of internal and external challenges, a result that Jiang and his colleagues could only build upon (Teiwes, 2002). In addition, the costly lessons of the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen had warned the third generation of the disastrous consequences of unconstrained internal divisions. As a result, there seemed to be a solid consensus among the third generation that leadership solidarity should be maintained. Jiang mentioned

Deng's maxim of 'stability above all' on numerous occasions and his stress on stability meant that, first of all, stability and regularity among the leadership itself. So, in such a context, the notion of Nathan's patron-client factionalism seemed to be less convincing than before. Certainly, nepotism and favouritism on the basis of personal loyalty were still very important, especially in the appointments of influential posts (Li, 2000). However, for a vulnerable leadership which – for a time – lacked political confidence in the system itself (Fewsmith, 1997), aggregating interests, building consensus, pluralising factions and sharing power were much more important than asserting differences. Moreover, for a Party that seriously lacked but was desperately seeking invulnerable and long-lasting legitimating resources, a move to institutionalised, normal politics which provided stability would be desirable since it conformed to the populace's fear of chaos and desire for economic security.

Jiang faced a China which was more difficult to govern than ever before because there were a far greater number of interests at work both inside and outside the system. From the central-local relations perspective, the over decentralised structure left by Deng was not able to accommodate such drastic economic development and the increasingly uneven regional pattern associated with it. The central government lacked its own means to collect taxes and the drought of the central coffers impeded the ability of transfer payments which could help to balance regional development. In 1994 and 1998, the centre implemented federal-style taxation and banking system reforms in order to selectively centralise state power (Zheng, 2000). Politically, measures were also taken to bring the centre and the provinces together. One of the most important approaches was to recruit more provincial leaders into important national power institutions, including the Politburo. Under these institutional arrangements which were de facto federalism in nature, provincial leaders not only preserved the flexibility of implementing differentiated policies to provide economic

incentives in their jurisdictions, but were also able to exert influence over central government policy making through increased clout in the central nerve of politics (Tien and Zhu, 2000).

The continued expansion and diversification of the Chinese economy had important political implications. Reform has produced winners and losers in large numbers. On the one hand, a wealthy middle class emerged from the economic opportunities and upward mobility brought about by the reform. On the other hand, SOE workers, once the pride of Mao's China, now complained about layoffs and unpaid pensions; peasants, once the mainstay of China's Communist Revolution, now protested against exorbitant levies and land grabs by corrupt local officials. They took actions through strikes, demonstrations and even violence to press their demands. Since 1989, the leaders have made preparations to quell social unrest, the transformation of large number of soldiers into armed police being one of the latest such preparations (Bonnin, 2000). And, in some high profile cases, Jiang's regime did respond by resorting to force. But a regime that was increasingly reliant on coercive power was unlikely to last long. So, the government must take these petitions into account and it did so by expanding the role of 'intermediate' associations (Fewsmith, 2002) – (state) trade unions, neighbourhood committees and other civic organisations that would help to buffer direct clashes. Some of these organisations, albeit with limited independence, did play more than the role of the 'transmission belt' and articulated some societal interests, moving along a continuum from 'state corporatism' towards 'societal corporatism' (Unger and Chan, 1996). These input institutions helped the state in seeking a new accommodation with society (Fewsmith, 2002).

Since the 1990s, government-business relations have become an important dimension of policy making. Market reforms led to greater firm political activism and gave rise to trade associations. Business lobbying was widespread. Kennedy (2005) argues that factors

– such as the degree of informality of the policy process, firm size, firm aggressiveness, transparency of the industry in question and access to government – are positively related to a firm's influence in policy making. Despite the activism of domestic companies, China's accession to the WTO and the promise of national treatment to foreign firms also encouraged foreign lobbying. In cases concerning industries that were so integrated into global production networks, foreign firms regularly colluded with their Chinese counterparts to 'work' policy making to their own advantage. Although firms' involvement in policies made the process seem more inclusive, these inputs would not necessarily improve the quality or equality of policies and might make room for money politics in the policy process. Furthermore, consumers and other stakeholders who were likely to be affected by these policies had far less freedom and capability to organise and make their concerns heard, giving firms – especially large ones – a disproportionate weight in terms of their say over public policies. The disastrous consequences of the symbiotic government-business relations manifested itself in the milk scandal.

Power has become more fiscally and spatially decentralised and diffused. Without the personalised legitimacy based on revolutionary prestige, Jiang instead sought procedural legitimacy by increasingly turning to institutional instruments for interest articulation (Fewsmith, 2002). For example, the role and importance of Leading Small Groups (LSG) were strengthened during Jiang's reign (Shambaugh, 2001). LSGs were formal policy deliberation bodies regarding specific inter-agency issues, comprising principal leaders from every department or ministry involved. These Groups were usually chaired by a member of the PSC who oversaw that broad realm, ensuring that decisions were reached by taking into account the widest bureaucratic interests and were compromising and consensual. The presence of a heavyweight in LSGs as the ultimate arbiter also ensured the obedience to final resolutions by all participants, because these resolutions were adopted

on behalf of the PSC. In addition, there has been a greater emphasis on rule by law. The People's Congress and its specialised committees at various levels have been playing an important role in policy deliberations (Tanner, 1999). To a lesser extent, they constrained government power, or at least put enormous pressure on the government for its controversial actions. For example, the resolution to build the Three Gorges Dam was passed at the 8th NPC in 1993 with one-third against or abstaining. On the proposal to grant special legislative powers to Shenzhen, 40 percent of delegates opted against (Gilley, 2004).

Policies made under the third generation were more rational. Many members of this generation were engineers by training. As such, this was a technocratic leadership and by implication these leaders' background in technical education might influence their approach to policy making in that they focused more on 'problems' than the ideological implications pertaining to these policy solutions (Fewsmith, 2002). In this respect, the third generation resorted to more 'scientific methods'. Major policies were made usually after feasibility and pilot studies had been undertaken and advice was sought from various quarters (Shambaugh, 2001). It has become a common practice for Politburo members to visit provinces (*kaocha*), asking for opinions and collecting empirical evidence needed for policy making before Party Plenums. Once policies were formulated, implementation was more carefully monitored than in the past, there was more regularised feedback from lower levels, and policy re-evaluation and alterations were made along the way (Shambaugh, 2001).

Think tanks and research institutes flourished in the Jiang era. These institutes not only grew in numbers but also expanded their areas of investigation from economic issues to social issues. Some even covered sensitive issues such as foreign affairs and cross-straits relations (Wang, 2008). At the same time, some think tanks also developed a limited

degree of independence. In the 1980s, most research institutes were part of the government or were government sponsored. In the 1990s, more research institutes emerged in universities. Some were only quasi-governmental because they had diversified sources of funding. For example, The China Centre for Economic Research (CCER) at Peking University, headed by Lin Yifu, was partly sponsored by the Ford Foundation. There were even several truly independent think tanks, such as the Unirule Institute of Economics (Outlook Weekly, 2009). Like their western counterparts, they not only contributed to state policy research but also provided consulting for businesses and sometimes informed the public about social issues of their concern.

Although Jiang could be credited with the professionalisation of the government and being more receptive to ideas and talents, the effectiveness of the channels for transmitting information into the system was constrained by Jiang himself, as well as Zhu Rongji. Both leaders tended to rely heavily on a designated group of scholars for advice, and these preferred scholars enjoyed much greater influence than any other scholars (Wang, 2008). Jiang relied heavily on the intellectuals and specialists in the Policy Research Office of the Central Committee, many of whom he brought to Beijing from Shanghai, including political scientist Wang Huning, who was said to have formulated Jiang's 'Three Emphases' and 'Three Representatives' discourses behind the scenes, as well as pushed for the expansion of village-level elections (Shambaugh, 2001). While Zhu Rongji consulted a broader range of scholars regardless of their formal affiliation, his self-confidence and impatience sometimes also led to decisions based on his own instincts and preference of advice. Therefore, it was fair to say that although the third generation welcomed evidence-based policy making, they were still capable of imposing personal preferences in final decisions.

Jiang was criticised for his over-preoccupation with pragmatic difficulties while lacking a vision of the future (Fewsmith, 2002). However, beginning in 2000, he made tremendous efforts in ideological and institutional spheres that marked his political legacy. Both were related to learning from other parts of the world. In the ideological sphere, his promotion of ‘Three Representatives’ (the Party should represent the most advanced forces of production, advanced culture and the interests of the broad mass of the population) brought down the ideological barrier of the Party’s class-based recruitment. It was ideologically justified to absorb elites from all walks of life into the Party regardless of their class identifications. Jiang’s ideological contributions could make the Party more inclusive and flexible in incorporating societal forces. In fact, his invention could be attributed to lessons the Party learnt from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Party scholars identified that one important reason for the Soviet collapse was that it disenfranchised its economic, social and intellectual elites. These elites then became the adversaries of the Soviet regime before and during its collapse. Thus, in order to remain in power, the CCP needed to adapt and welcome new and existing elites rather than oppose them (Lee, 2008). In the institutional sphere, Jiang and Zhu’s push for the WTO membership was intended to socialise China into the global political economy. They used the WTO accession as an external catalyst to accelerate domestic reform, subjecting local government behaviour to international agreements that were binding and to the continuous scrutiny of the international community.

China under Jiang Zemin was characterised by the continuance of liberalisation initiated by Deng. Normal politics began to take shape in that ‘game to win all’ style factional struggle disappeared (Teiwes, 2002). There were no dominating ‘isms’ intertwined with the conduct of politics and policy making has become more constituency based (Shambaugh, 2001). The generational change of the leadership, diversification of

interests and a more plural institutional sphere of policy making, nurtured more rational and scientific policies. Consultation was regularised and the transmission channels between state and society were broadened. With the exception of an ideological great leap forward to incorporate a broader range of constituencies, the third generation proceeded very cautiously with regard to political reform. However, as the Fanglin incident and SARS showed, transparency, openness and accountability were badly needed in the system. The pressure of political reform on Hu Jintao and the fourth generation was tremendous.

3.6.4 The Hu Era and Emerging Pluralism

During the political high season between autumn 2002 and spring 2003, the PRC underwent its most orderly power transition in history. At the 16th PC, Jiang Zemin stepped down with decent legacies: GDP had more than doubled compared with 1989; living standards had improved considerably for many; the successful bid for the 2008 Olympics boosted the country's international prestige; and everything else on the achievement list attributed to him suggested that China already stood firmly at the doorstep of prosperity and modernisation. However, problems that had accumulated during the same period were also grave: China degraded from being one of the most egalitarian countries to one of the most unequal; there was severe environmental degradation; there was widespread corruption as well as social unrest; and, most importantly, there was a political system without genuine transparency and accountability that 'still falls short of the expectations of the people' (Xinhua, 2007a). The regime over which Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao would be presiding was sitting atop a volcano on the verge of eruption (He, 2003).

Hu and Wen hence took a timely populist policy shift (Li, 2006), appealing to ordinary Chinese people who were increasingly concerned about economic equality and social justice. This apparently populist turn seemed to be Hu-Wen's return to the 'mass line' which reversed Jiang's 'elitist line' in the previous decade. Based on this observation, Li Cheng went so far as to argue that there was an emergence of a new 'bipartisanship' – the formation of two 'constituency based' coalitions within the CCP that clustered around Jiang and Hu-Wen respectively, competing with each other for power, influence and policy initiatives (Li, 2005).

This conceived division conformed well to the conventional wisdom regarding the nature of Chinese elite politics since Deng – factionalism in the form of a 'two-line struggle', and in the context of the Hu era, a two-line struggle between the Shanghai gang which stressed the 'economic task of generating growth' and the CYL (or *tuanpai*) which was more concerned with the 'political task of promoting development' (Breslin, 2008b:218). However, no matter how the new leadership claimed that they were different from their predecessors, the regularity of Chinese politics effectively ruled out the possibility of any sustained dramatic policy turn. The aforementioned orderly power transition ensured some degree of continuity, not only in the composition of the top leadership itself but also in the general direction of policy making. It should be noted that Hu Jintao had been an influential member of the third generation for ten years before he became the paramount leader of the fourth generation. Some popular policies attributed to him actually took root in the tenure of the third generation. For example, Hu-Wen tirelessly promoted the conception of scientific development as their ideological and ideational contributions. One important component of scientific development was balanced regional development, but the strategic push for narrowing the gap between the coastal area and hinterland – the Go West Development – was actually initiated by Jiang and Zhu as early

as 1999. Under this strategy, the GDP growth rate of western provinces had already taken off before Hu assumed office in 2002 (Holbig, 2004). In addition, Hu's pledges of rule by law and of intra-Party democracy were not entirely new because these concepts could be traced back to Jiang and even Deng.

Even from a patron-client factionalism perspective, the delineation of a two-line struggle was over simplistic. If the notion of a conventionally conceived 'faction' was still relevant, then one may discover that there were many diversified interests at work and there were indeed many factions, be they the *tuanpai*, the Shanghai gang, 'princelings' (*taizi dang*), the secretary clique, the petroleum clique, the Qinghua clique, the Beida clique, and so on. But political stability would have been undermined if each faction went in its own way firmly to pursue incompatible goals. As such, the relatively stable status of Chinese politics suggested the limitation of strictly defined factionalism. In fact, these so called factions were by no means monolithic. They were fluid and thus not mutually exclusive in terms of membership or policy priorities. One leader may possess several factional identities but may pursue policies which were sufficiently centrist. Such ambiguities could actually make the leader in question neutral and potentially accepted by more people. Furthermore, promising leaders had much broader administrative experience and expertise (and those whom did were likely to be promoted more quickly, *ceteris paribus*). They may have worked in both coastal and inland provinces. Equally, being a Party apparatchik did not necessarily mean lacking awareness of modern economics, and being a populist leader did not necessarily mean alienation from other social elites. In short, factions have become much more plural and similarities (or at least compatibilities) often obscured sharp distinctions. This was not to argue the irrelevance of factional conflict in Chinese politics, but the pluralisation of factions did facilitate interest articulation, power sharing and consensus building. This trend of pluralisation was more likely to hold

the Party together than precipitating a split from within, and perhaps a key step towards what Hu Jintao called intra-Party harmony (*dangnei hexie*), which was also the prerequisite for social harmony, as he argued (Xinhua, 2007a).

What did emerge as the distinctive feature of high politics in the Hu era was the enlargement of the PSC's size from 7 to 9. The Party chief in charge of propaganda and the chair of the Central Politics and Law Commission (China's internal security apparatus) both gained an extra seat in the PSC, whereas in the Jiang and Deng eras they only each had a seat in the full Politburo. This expansion of the PSC reflected the rising importance of persuasion (through propaganda) and coercion (through tightening internal security) in the Hu era. Increased fragmentation at the top level meant that policies made in the realms of propaganda and internal security became increasingly autonomous of the Party's overall policy. And, as both were of a repressive nature, they hindered the Party's experiments with new initiatives from time to time.

In central-local relations, like their predecessors, Hu-Wen also faced the problem of local disobedience, and at least in their first five-year term, local resistance undermined the central authority considerably. Hu-Wen's scientific paradigm of promoting balanced economic, social and environmental development was perceived by some local authorities, especially in well-off provinces, as being incompatible with their single-minded GDP stimulation model and oligarchic political economy. In the Hu era, local governments were involved in all sorts of activities dominated by short-termism, such as selling or leasing land to generate revenue and investing heavily in energy-inefficient industries and projects, all of which were undertaken at the expense of wider, longer-term developmental goals set by the central government (Breslin, 2007). These short-term measures were often carried out without consultation with the people affected and more often than not through illegal

means such as land grabs and forced relocation. As a result, social protests soared in the Hu era, largely owing to local government wrongdoings (Shirk, 2007).

Although local governments were central to the functioning of an economic system that had dysfunctionally emerged to suit local government interests (Breslin, 2007), Hu-Wen could not simply clean them up overnight, because dealing too hard a blow on them would lead to a hard landing and chaos. Nevertheless, Hu-Wen did ‘arouse’ the people affected to put some limited checks and balances on local authorities, not through a Cultural Revolution-style campaign, but by directing blame to local offices. A new regulation adopted by the State Council in 2005 stipulated that petitioners should appeal to local governments according to territorial jurisdiction and the responsibility of the department in charge, instead of coming all the way to Beijing (Li, 2006). By making local governments more accountable, the legitimacy of the central leadership could actually be enhanced. The new regulation placed political pressure on local leaders while enabling the central leadership to avoid blame, because people’s complaints about injustice and inequality to local governments accorded with the central government’s stress on justice and equality. In addition, Hu-Wen also resorted to cadre management measures to bring the provinces under tighter control. As Mao once argued, ‘cadres are a decisive factor, once the political line is determined’ (Mao, 1956). Hu-Wen increased the geographical mobility and transfer of provincial level leaders. It was thought that localism could be considerably contained by appointing ‘outsiders’ – who were detached from the local web of interests – to decisive positions (Zheng, 1999), at least in the short term.

In his first five-year term, Hu Jintao’s incumbency represented something of a breakthrough in legal-rational terms (Weatherley, 2006). Most remarkable was progress in relation to transparency. After Hu Jintao took power, Politburo meeting briefs were routinely publicised. Party and government departments (including the Ministry of

National Defence) each had a spokesperson to inform the media and the mass public regularly about decisions made. Government whitepapers were published regarding major issues, increasing the transparency even on sensitive issues such as military spending. Public hearings were held before major change in public policies. In fact, these initiatives could be traced back to Zhao Ziyang, and were a continuation of his pledge at the 13th PC two decades ago that ‘major issues should be made known to the people, major questions should be discussed with the people before being resolved’ (Zhao, 1987). Whilst Zhao’s quest for limited transparency was almost completely ignored during the price reform and Tiananmen, Hu’s promise for greater transparency survived several major crises. In the SARS crisis and the milk scandal, despite an initial cover-up, the government later changed course, publicising the issues and handling them in a much more transparent way. In the 2003 Ming-class submarine incident and the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, media coverage followed immediately after the crises.

In terms of institutionalisation, the fourth generation also made their contribution. On the part of the Party, Hu Jintao took measures to improve intra-Party democracy, such as resuming Zhao Ziyang’s practice of presenting the Politburo’s work report to the Central Committee. Furthermore, this was stipulated as a routine in the newly adopted ‘Regulation on Intra-Party Supervision’ at the Third Plenary Session of the Sixteenth Central Committee (People’s Net, 2004). In addition, the Party enacted many regulations governing the selection and promotion of cadres and many informal norms emerged (Fewsmith, 2008). On the part of the State Council, Wen Jiabao further institutionalised decision making by replacing the Premier Work Meetings for State Council Executive Meetings and State Council Plenary Meetings as platforms for major decision making, because the latter two meetings had legal status whereas the former had not (Zhao, 2006b). In relation to improving accountability, although lacking a practicable and formalised

mechanism, informal norms were established which meant that officials responsible for major mistakes would be demoted or even removed, as the cases of Zhang Wenkang and Meng Xuenong (removed twice) demonstrated, not to mention the hundreds that were sacked during the combat against SARS and relief work of the Sichuan earthquake owing to their incompetence.

The intellectual landscape also has become more plural. As the economic reform deepened, and particularly at the juncture of joining the WTO, concerns over the side effects of neoliberalism apparently found a growing audience in Zhongnanhai (Fewsmith, 2008). In contrast to the Jiang era, when liberals and neoliberals gained disproportionate influence, intellectuals representing the left portion of the ideological spectrum – the Old Left and the New Left – emerged as a counterbalance to the Right with Hu's populist turn. There have been sharp debates about the future vision of China, but the Party was willing to listen to opinions and criticisms from a wide political spectrum.

At the same time, the transmittal of information between the state and the society was broadened. Think tanks were still very important, but they were 'knit into a web of policy debate network which makes think tanks less distinctive nodes of that network' (Naughton, 2002:625). Zhao Quansheng argued that the network was becoming increasingly active and multi-layered. He identified seven channels: consultations with policy makers; internal reports via government channels; conferences and public policy debates; policy NGOs; outside-system (*tizhi wai*) discussions; overseas scholars; and a highly specialised, professional community (Zhao, 2006a). And apart from these listed, consultations between the CCP and China's eight intellectuals-based 'democratic' parties, a channel institutionalised under Hu, should also be counted. More profoundly, the Chinese public has been gradually moving away from the periphery and towards the centre stage of policy debates, thanks to the widespread use of the Internet. Most netizens might not yet be able

to sophisticatedly articulate a specific policy, but the strong populist sentiment among them often led to the government's serious consideration regarding what they said. Virtually every policy constituency wanted to gain the support of a huge number of netizens in pursuing their goals. For example, non-mainstream intellectuals whose ideas were previously ignored by the policy circle now 'reach out' to netizens in the hope of generating a critical mass of public pressure so as to force decision makers into accepting their ideas (Wang, 2008).

Hu-Wen continued to seek foreign ideas to improve the system in China. Their interests were very 'plural' in that they sought to learn from both mature democracies and prolonged authoritarian systems. These analyses were transmitted into the system to inform recent CCP reforms (Shambaugh, 2008a; 2008b). In late 2003, the full Politburo attended a group study session on the 'historical development trajectory of the world's major powers since the 15th century'. This study session was said to have inspired the Hu-Wen leadership on China's future vision and was decisive to the enunciation of the 'peaceful rise' thesis. In 2004, a resolution on 'consolidating the CCP's governing capacity' was adopted at the Fourth Plenary Session. The contents of this resolution were essentially the conclusions drawn by several research teams dispatched to the former Soviet Union and other Eastern European states studying the longevity of their ruling parties (Fewsmith, 2008). Hu hoped that by avoiding the mistakes of these parties that led to their downfall, the CCP could enhance its governing capacity and hence sustain its rule. In addition, Chinese analysts were particularly interested in social democratic parties in Western Europe and the way they managed a successful shift from traditional and ideological to more modern, popular and improved socialism. The CCP even sent young cadres to Japan to learn from their strengths in disaster management, despite the ups and downs in diplomatic relations between the two countries (Jiang, 2009).

Hu Jintao devoted much of his time in office to addressing the problems covered up by Jiang's neo-conservative approach to governance (Fewsmith, 2008). He adopted a more populist policy programme to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing and dividing society. Chinese politics has become more plural than ever before in terms of the conduct of elite politics and the interest matrix. He responded with considerable adeptness in central-local relations and state-intellectual relations, and made remarkable achievements in improving the transparency, institutionalisation and accountability of the regime. If the above were considered his recipe for tinkering with the current system and muddling through, his doctrine of a 'socialist harmonious society' clearly inspired more hope. A harmonious society, as Hu depicted, was an ideal system that offered a people-centred government, a socio-economically sustainable and environmentally friendly economy, and a rule by law society. However, this ideal could not be achieved as long as an inherent contradiction was not resolved – a contradiction between empowering the people on the one hand, whilst keeping the grip on power on the other, a contradiction that has been obsessing the Party since the founding of the People's Republic. More often than not, it was the regime's very inclination to 'grip' rather than 'empower' that blocked the channels of reliable information, the talent and the societal input needed for policy making.

3.7 International Pressure

This section briefly explains the role of international pressure in affecting China's management of domestic crisis. In this thesis, the international factor is very important in moderating China's behaviour, as we shall see in the case studies. Nonetheless,

substantively incorporating the international dimension will require the application of such frameworks as foreign policy analysis, which is beyond the scope of this thesis. Also, using foreign policy analysis is more appropriate for the study of inter-state political-military crises in the realm of traditional security, but not particularly suitable for our case studies – NTS crises mainly threaten a specific nation-state but with an uncertain transnational dimension if they are not handled properly by the national government concerned. Therefore, here we continue our domestic focus and only outline the ‘intermesticity’ in China’s handling of domestic crises. More detailed discussions of the international dimension are to follow in the case studies.

As argued in the introduction, as far as NTS crises were concerned, China has behaved like a status quo power, i.e. a rule taker of international institutions, or an emerging rule maker that mostly contributes to stabilising existing international institutions rather than promoting its own alternative (Breslin, 2010). China’s orientation to existing international institutions and orders can be explained by the fact that it is a country which has benefited most from adhering to such orders in the last three decades, and its rapid economic rise can be attributed to its playing by the rules within existing institutions. China thus regards behaving like a status quo power as a way of building up and maximising its national interests. For instance, China’s more than decade long perseverance in negotiating its WTO membership as well as the substantial concessions it has made best exemplify its willingness to embrace international institutions (Kim, 2004). In addition, although China is adept at *realpolitik*, it is relatively inexperienced at managing NTS and human security crises when compared with industrialised countries. Its lack of institutional and operational capacity has propelled the Chinese government to socialise itself into the existing framework of international cooperation on managing global risk.

More importantly, since China opened up in the late 1970s (and even more so since 1992), its diplomacy has been subordinated to, and in the service of, domestic goals. In the reform era, there have been triangular and mutually reinforcing relations between diplomacy, interdependent economic development and regime stability at home. In other words, China needs to be seen as behaving responsibly in the international arena in order to create a favourable external environment for China's ongoing economic growth, on which China's political stability rests (Breslin, 2010; Buzan, 2010; Wang, 1999; Zhang, 1998).

Given the primarily domestic origin of China's international behaviour, in this thesis we treat China's responses to international pressure or expectation as a dependent variable, i.e. the international dimension of China's crisis management is a function of China's domestic policies and political context. The abovementioned four contextual themes, to different degrees, can all determine China's largely cooperative international behaviour. That is, GDP centred political economy and performance-based legitimacy require China to continue behaving as a rule taker of international institutions, in order to secure foreign investment and resources needed for domestic growth, and to secure overseas market access for Chinese-made goods. In terms of state control of information, the changing strategy of censorship from bluntly suppressing to tactically managing information, creates limited transparency for international media as well as disciplining China's behaviour under an international spotlight. In terms of state-society relations, the increasingly open Chinese society – with its constant flow of people and ideas into and out of China – is putting pressure on the Chinese government to behave like a 'normal' country. This is especially true when informed citizens make a comparison between China and other 'normal' countries on a particular concern, such as environmental protection, food safety and public services. For policy making, the transmission of foreign interests into the system as a result of emerging pluralism means that China now has to take into account

concerns of international stakeholders when making domestic policies. Also, as Chinese policy makers learn from foreign experience and are socialised into the global epistemic community, their policy making processes and policy outputs are becoming more professional (Zhao, 2006a), which also means that China's domestic policies are increasingly compatible with international norms.

Chapter 4: Case Study One: The SARS Epidemic

4.1 Introduction

The SARS epidemic was the first major crisis facing the newly inaugurated Hu-Wen leadership. It hit the country unexpectedly and caused significant frustration to the political system through a series of thorough exposure of the cleavages and weaknesses within the system. Despite the regime's changing course in the later phase of the crisis, its crisis management strategies were largely reactive. The effective containment of the epidemic seemed a win-win scenario for both the state and the society. The state certainly learnt the costly lesson and subsequently took considerable administrative as well as legislative measures to improve its crisis management capacity. The society, on the other hand, eventually pushed the agenda and prompted the state to address the anxiety of the people. After the SARS crisis, as a result, a new social contract seemed to be reached between the Party and the people. It represented a shift towards the new equilibria in the demand for and the supply of democratisation (Breslin, 2008a) which included such new elements as transparent information and political accountability.

The SARS crisis once again demonstrated that the CCP regime possessed remarkable resilience and adaptability despite its authoritarian nature. Speculations about SARS as 'China's Chernobyl' which would consequently lead to 'perestroika and glasnost' (restructuring and openness, as happened in the Soviet Union following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster) were proved over-optimistic (Fewsmith, 2003a). Moreover, it was largely the temporary return to the Maoist mass mobilisation, not progress towards democratisation, that enabled the Chinese government to bring the epidemic under

effective control within a brief period (Gries and Rosen, 2004). In other words, it was mainly the CCP's formidable mobilisation capacity and non-compromising, heavy-handed approach of disease control that reversed the grave situation.

If we look back to the 1950s, we may well find that the effective elimination of schistosomiasis, smallpox, cholera and other epidemics was also achieved through mass campaigns. The CCP seems adept at countering infectious diseases historically so there is little surprise that the CCP will do a satisfactory job once the Party apparatus is fully mobilised in the Maoist manner. It is therefore fair to suggest that this mobilisation and extractive capacity has been effective in responding to extraordinary circumstances.

The SARS crisis was therefore an extraordinary event that revealed not only the weaknesses, but also the strength of China's political system. It was a fascinating case for the analysis of the nature of contemporary Chinese politics because it was a classic example of the CCP managing crisis through manipulation and maximum tinkering with the current system. In addition, to a large extent, the importance of crisis management as a crucial dimension of public policy had not been fully recognised by Chinese policy makers up until SARS. Similarly, the subject of crisis management as a popular discipline was also born of SARS. Much of the crisis learning from SARS has been translated into policy and legislative amendments that in turn affect future crisis management behaviour. Thus, our case study starts with SARS, which serves as a good benchmark for the other two crises.

4.2 The Pre-SARS Milieu

Before looking at how the SARS crisis unfolded, we need to have in mind the shape of China's socio-economic milieu prior to the crisis and the many governance problems that elevated a local health issue into a transnational political disaster. To apply the terminology

in the analytical framework we developed in Chapter 2, these crucial conditions and problems formed the pool of 'raw materials' out of which the Party first picked and mixed to construct a crisis discourse and then selectively addressed. So the SARS crisis should be analysed in the context of the following dimensions.

4.2.1 The Economic Dimension: The Problematic Growth Model

The orthodox economic thought in China at the turn of the 21st century was to achieve a 'moderately well off' level of prosperity through the use of neoliberal economic policies. Since Deng's Southern Tour (the Nanxun) in 1992 which reinvigorated the reform, the single-minded pursuit of GDP growth has been the dominating task for Chinese officials at all levels. As a result, the concept of development was conceived interchangeably with the meaning of economic growth. This narrow definition considered neither the quality of growth, nor its sustainability. Moreover, the GDP-focused development model marginalised social and human development on the national agenda and created as many problems as it solved. The most notable consequence of this GDP-focused development model was the unraveling of the socialist welfare system. The marketisation of healthcare, housing and education meant that access to welfare services increasingly depended on one's ability to pay. As mentioned in the last chapter, the tax-sharing reform of 1994 aimed at strengthening the state's redistribution capacity through centralising tax revenue further exacerbated the problem of inadequate welfare spending at the local level, due to the fact that most of this expenditure had to be financed by local governments on their own. As a result, the levels of social protection provided by local governments varied substantially across regions. In less developed localities, welfare services were often underfunded, especially in healthcare and education.

This growth model provided the best explanation for the so called 'Chinese Miracle'. However, the model's sustainability and legitimacy have been hotly debated at home and internationally. China's Maoist Old Left criticised these neoliberal policies as the restoration of capitalism and a betrayal to the Party's revolutionary promises. While China's social-democratic oriented New Left was less critical on market principles per se, but worried more about the negative consequences of the neoliberal project (Breslin, 2008a). International critics similarly argued that China was 'an ideal capitalist state' which embraced capitalist doctrines for the purpose of growth while at the same time suppressing those affected by the negative impacts of economic liberalisation (Zhao, 2008).

Like all other governments, the Chinese government also constructed discourses to justify controversial policies. The official reasoning could be summarised by two mysterious numbers, 8% and 2000-2020. The mysterious 8% referred to the asserted bottom line growth rate that the Chinese government must achieve in order to create enough jobs for maintaining stability. Extensive protests by redundant state owned enterprise workers in 1997-8 when the growth rate failed to achieve 8% were seemingly fresh examples of what might happen once growth slowed down (and bear in mind that the activities of the Falungong peaked in the same period). So the growth rate became something more than an indicator of economic health, but an indispensable pillar of the Party's stable rule. Furthermore, growth and stability were thought to be mutually dependent and mutually enhancing, i.e. more growth would deliver a higher level of stability, which would in turn constitute the prerequisite for further growth. In hindsight, it could be argued that this understanding on the relationship between growth and stability was deeply flawed because a high growth rate generated at the expense of social and human development clearly engendered the possibility of more instability. However, this misunderstanding was widely held by local governments at the time prior to SARS.

The focus on GDP growth also heavily influenced the CCP's nomenklatura system. The ability to stimulate GDP growth and to maintain stability in one's jurisdiction was regarded as the most important factor in determining the promotion of officials (Chen et al, 2005). However, this could result in the relationship between growth and stability becoming zero-sum. For example, when economic situation deteriorated, local governments often deployed more coercive means to maintain superficial stability, or when social tensions increased, local governments often attributed them to inadequate growth and in response poured investment into large projects in order to stimulate growth. These patterns were seen in a number of localities, which could lead to the accumulation of unresolved contradictions in the long term.

The year of 2000-2020 was referred to as the 'period of strategic opportunities'. This was the mainstream belief in the Chinese academia and policy circle that emerged in the mid 1990s. The basic prediction was that the first two decades of the 21st century would be a brief window of opportunity that China must not miss for its economic construction, because China's surrounding international situation would be relatively less hostile so that China could maximise its comparative advantages in the global economic integration. The unsaid meaning of this was that it was in China's interest to further economic liberalisation for rapid growth, while leaving other non-economic tasks aside for the time being. This argument clearly had a materialist tinge that prioritised the accumulation of wealth over the (re)distribution of wealth. Similarly, the argument about the 'transitional period' also emphasised efficiency over equality. Advocates of the 'transitional period' argument contended that the period when socio-economic dislocations came hand in hand with high growth, was an unavoidable phase of development that China must undergo because the former was the inevitable cost of the latter. The term was challenged by Wang Hui who saw the 'mystification of a "transitional period"' by

neoliberalism supporters a deliberate effort to explain away the adverse effects of market reforms (Wang, 2004b:8).

So, it was obvious to see the incentive (and in many cases, imperative) for Chinese officials to be preoccupied with GDP growth, and the disincentive for them to pay equal attention to social development. In particular, the ‘transitional period’ argument was so powerful in that it was not only accepted by many among the public, but also had a considerable purchase within the bureaucracy. Given the deep-rooted ‘GDPism’, it was also unsurprising that when there was a public health crisis such as SARS, local officials still worried more about GDP growth than the people’s health. To a certain extent, Deng’s catchphrase ‘(economic) Development is of overriding importance’ was misinterpreted and the product of which became the root of many social problems.

4.2.2 The Political Dimension: Fragmented Authoritarianism

The second contextual dimension highly relevant to the trajectory of SARS concerned the structures of policy making and implementation. China’s massive state apparatus was comprised of an extensive bureaucratic network, with agencies organised vertically as the ‘*tiao*’ (line) and horizontally as the ‘*kuai*’ (block) (Lieberthal, 1992). This complex *tiao-kuai* structure had two profound implications for the policy process in practice. Firstly, policies made at the centre were often subject to the manipulation or selective implementation by local governments which then incorporated its own goals into the policy implementation itself. This type of manipulation thus reduced the efficacy of central government policies (Mertha, 2009). This was especially true when an institutionally powerful ‘block’ agency intervened in the policy implementation of an institutionally weak ‘line’ agency.

Secondly, as we mentioned in the last chapter on policy making and fragmented authoritarianism, policy formation was often accompanied by the conflict of interests between agencies, because for a number of policy areas, there was no clear-cut division of jurisdictions. This ambiguity could result in vacuums of governance in some policy areas as no agencies were specifically designated to take the lead until the negotiation was settled. This could be very dangerous during crises since inter-agency bargaining would jeopardise responsiveness.

During some major crises in particular, an extra layer of complexity: the civilian-military cooperation, exacerbated the already complex inter-agency coordination problem. There had been no legal backing for the civilian government to command the military until the promulgation of the National Defence Mobilisation Law (Gov.cn, 2010a). As a result, for outside observers, crisis management in China was often characterised by a period of initial inaction when government departments were sorting out which was going to do what. As an interim measure, a task force, such as a LSG, was often set up to oversee the cross-departmental coordination. The important role played by this type of ad hoc organisations was an important characteristic of Chinese crisis management. These task forces were often powerful enough to break the institutional deadlock because they were chaired by political heavyweights. But the potential limitation was that the efficacy of the inter-agency coordination depended more on the strength of the political leadership than the formal institution.

Another persistent problem with fragmented authoritarianism was getting the accurate information from below and synthesising it for policy making. Even in the unlikely case where information was free from manipulation, it was still difficult to gather it for macro level evaluation, because in the cumbersome state apparatus agencies charged with different responsibilities were not obliged to share information with other agencies

outside their 'line' or 'block' jurisdictions. Within each sub-system of the state apparatus, the information flow was less obstructed, but at the same time there existed incentives for subordinates to distort information from below, owing to the result-oriented nature of the performance contract which they had to sign with their direct boss (Saich, 2003). Hence lower level officials were inclined to suppress negative news as no one was willing to risk their political career which hinged on the evaluation of their performance by superior governments.

4.2.3 The Intermedic Dimension: State-society Relations and International Pressure

Prior to SARS, perhaps the CCP's most symbolic move that generated controversy about whom the Party represented was Jiang's 'Three Represents' ideological innovation aimed at absorbing the emerging economic and social elites into the Party. They were the strata that benefited most from the reform and many of whom within the strata had been regarded as 'capitalists' not long ago. Although this step seemed rational given the Party's strategy to expand its support base, this move isolated the CCP from the mass public. For many, Jiang and Zhu represented the interests of China's new rich and both leaders favoured well-off coastal provinces over other underdeveloped hinterlands. During their rule, China accelerated state enterprise reforms amid resentment from laid-off workers, signed the WTO deal despite the potential threats to China's uncompetitive agricultural industry (Bhattasali et al, 2004). The closing down of two leftist journals by Jiang in the fear that they might mobilise resentment from disadvantaged groups also revealed the Party's alienation from the working class, its traditional support base (Zhao, 2008). In addition, official corruption scandals and widespread crony capitalism severely eroded the Party's

image. The Party was seen by the masses as not serving the interests of the people but enriching itself.

As a result, the credibility of the Party was declining. While the distrust of the Party always existed, the problem was not as serious as when the information technology empowered citizens. There were inherent contradictions between a state not used to open information and a 'wired' society whose members could not only obtain alternative information but also evaluate information critically. The efficacy of the 'transmission belt' in a digital age was very limited because people would no longer tolerate to be treated like children who needed spoon-fed information (Saich, 2003). So even when the government faced pressure and held press conferences to assure people, government messages could not convince many. And case after case when there was something wrong but the government said everything was as usual, people learnt the conviction that if those officials said 'no', the truth must be 'yes' (Zheng and Lye, 2004). People were confused and thus resorted to whatever available sources of information. The government's secrecy approach which was supposed to preserve stability actually undermined it.

Ironically, while the government made every effort to stop the penetration of foreign media information, its own tarnishing credibility prompted the people, especially the well educated and informed urbanites, to embrace foreign media. There emerged a network where foreign media information was utilised by Chinese users to articulate their concerns, or internally leaked information was utilised by the foreign media to lobby the international community which would subsequently press the Chinese government. This complex network of information exchange thus undermined the 'logic of territory' (Harvey, 2005) concerning the exercise of state power. As such, how did the Chinese government behave not only hinged on the consent of the Chinese people, but was also subject to the scrutiny of the international community. And as China has been well integrated into the

global trade and transportation networks, what happened in China would also have an impact on the rest of the world.

4.2.4 Contingent Factors

There were of course other contingent factors which shaped the trajectory of SARS. For example, the leadership transition took place between autumn 2002 and spring 2003 clearly prompted officials to take a more risk-averse approach when confronting SARS. Also, to a large extent, the virus of SARS itself was an external shock. It was a previously unknown natural disease that broke out with no warnings. So it was fair to forgive at least a part of the poor containment of SARS by the government. But as these factors were contingent, they would be considered in relation to how SARS unfolded rather than being listed as broad, fundamental dimensions. The following section will review the development of the SARS crisis chronologically given the aforementioned settings.

4.3 The Unfolding of the SARS Crisis

4.3.1 The Origin of the Virus

The SARS disease was thought to originate in Guangdong Province around November 2002. Southern China, including Guangdong has been one of the world's infectious disease hotbeds and scientists attribute this to the close proximity between human and wildlife raised for food (McKenna, 2004). So despite an initial small outbreak of SARS within Guangdong, the issue was not paid particular attention to and it was regarded as a purely medical problem because local health authorities were used to the mysterious emergence

and subsequent disappearance of new diseases in the winter-spring season given the documented history of flu strains in Guangdong (Thornton, 2009). However, the exact nature and cause of SARS were unknown, which increased the difficulty with detection and diagnosis, let alone preventive measures and treatment. As a result, the virus spread slowly to other localities in Guangdong almost uncontrollably. Its emergence in Guangdong also had an international consequence because Guangdong and Hong Kong were adjacent regions where daily cross-border population movement was very high. When the outbreak hit Guangdong, Hong Kong was among the first affected regions, from where the virus was also rapidly transmitted to other parts of the world.

4.3.2 Administrative Fragmentation

As a regional epidemic was about to break out around January 2003, the problem of administrative fragmentation presented a serious impediment to the containment of the virus. Owing to little information sharing, hospitals that suffered from small outbreaks did not alert other hospitals about the disease. First hand information on the characteristics of the virus from hospitals admitted SARS patients was not shared even within Guangdong province due to poor communications and the institutional setup (Lai, 2004). In addition, the military health authority, which was not responsible to the civilian government, possessed considerable assets and expertise in controlling infectious diseases. However, it did not share valuable information with civilian hospitals. For example, the Guangzhou Air Force Hospital did not have any spread of infections as a result of strictly employing basic hygiene procedures. But this hospital did not share the hard-learned experience with others (Puska, 2005). If this information was shared between civil and military hospitals as well as within jurisdictions of civil and military health authorities respectively, the infection

tragedies in hospital after hospital could have been less likely. Furthermore, military hospitals did not report the numbers of infections to the civilian health authority and this increased the difficulty for the civilian government to evaluate the overall infectious situation.

Moreover, the above problems revealed the failures of an outdated information collection system. The system of information management was intertwined with the priority conflicts between agencies was equally problematic. The civilian health authority would logically want to release as much disease-related information as possible but its capacity of doing so was constrained by its weak institutional status. More powerful departments, for example, the Party's propaganda department that was responsible for maintaining the Party's image, and the public security authority which oversaw social stability, both outranked the public health authority. As the Party's guards, these two departments would logically prefer to release as little negative news as possible in the fear of chaos once this information went public.

The CCP had a tracked record of blocking negative news in the face of crises. Although as mentioned above that departmental self-interestedness was partly responsible for the suppression of negative news, institutional factors mattered most. China's crisis response system was largely derived from the national defence mobilisation system, which was the institutional product of the CCP's revolutionary era (Zhong, 2007). The system required strict confidentiality and defined different levels of access to information according to one's political status. This practice was highly effective during an era when the international environment was very hostile. Confidentiality helped to preserve stability and localise a crisis given the limited scale of the movement of people and underdeveloped means of communication at the time. While it was reasonable to restrict information flow within a limited circle of personnel in times of war on the ground of protecting sensitive

information, the same justification could not easily fit with natural disasters and other forms of public emergencies where situations were developing rapidly and many lives were at stake. Since the reform in the late 1970s, China has been facing many more crises that originated from spheres of the society and the economy than from that of national security. However, the confidential requirements were largely unchanged despite the far-reaching socio-economic transformation, due to a sense of vulnerability commonly felt by authoritarian regimes in transition.

4.3.3 Legal Impediments to Timely Reporting

In addition to institutional factors, there were legal barriers to the timely reporting of tragedies prior to SARS. With the notion of rule by law gaining momentum since the 1980s, China's policy framework for guarding state secrets has also emphasised the use of laws as an important deterrence instrument. The State Secrets Law was enacted in 1988, followed by detailed implementing regulations with regard to different policy areas involving state secrets⁴³. These legislations and provisions jointly formed an extensive framework regarding the use and disclosure of sensitive information. However, these deterrence measures may not necessarily serve public interests well. In the case of SARS for example, only the Ministry of Health (MOH) or agencies authorised by it had the statutory authority to disclose this type of infectious disease according to the State Secrets Law and its implementing regulations regarding public health (Saich, 2003), which meant that any bold statements made prior to the MOH authorisation were unlawful. Therefore, given the risk of being prosecuted for leaking state secrets, officials were discouraged to say anything more than the Party line.

⁴³ For example, the MOH along with the State Secrets Protection Bureau, enacted in 1996 and 1997 detailed provisions regarding secretive issues in public health.

4.3.4 The Virus Spread Nationwide and Government Deception

Given the above context and the preoccupation with social stability, the Guangdong provincial authority kept silent about SARS from November 2002 up until February 2003, with the exception of a few denials about the spread of the virus by its subordinating local governments. Zhang Dejiang, the Party secretary of Guangdong, reportedly ordered a news blackout on SARS as soon as the Guangdong authority became aware of the spread of the virus (Puska, 2005). Nevertheless, as previously noted, the preoccupation with stability was often coupled with concerns about economic growth. Guangdong was the powerhouse of the Chinese economy and it was China's largest trading and taxpaying province. Its economic growth was highly reliant on foreign investment and tourism (especially from Hong Kong and Macau). Given its economic weight and outward orientation, it was unsurprising that the leadership of Guangdong were very concerned with any negative news such as SARS that could potentially affect inward investment and tourism. Several other economic factors also contributed to the decision to censor SARS in this period. In January 2003, the main reason for silencing reports on SARS was to maintain consumer confidence during the Chinese New Year so that people would continue to spend and travel (Washington Post, 2003). In addition, the spring was the high season of trade for Guangdong as the China Export Commodities Fair was about to open in Guangzhou in April 2003. The Fair was important to China's trade as well as to the country's open image so the authorities considered that this Fair should not be disrupted. One might also speculate about the motives of the Guangdong leadership on this delicate issue. The Party secretary, Zhang Dejiang and the provincial governor, Huang Huahua, both recently appointed to their respective posts, were relatively young among their same-ranking

colleagues. They were certainly cautious about their political careers and feared any exposure of bad news in their jurisdictions.

While governments at various levels sought to resolve the problem of SARS, they took a solely closed approach in the hope that they would eliminate the virus by working hard behind the scene (Zheng and Lye, 2004). However, without a concerted effort, the combat against the virus was poorly coordinated. Moreover, the problem of administrative fragmentation went beyond Guangdong province and worsened the overall situation. The Guangdong authority should have known about the seriousness of the virus by early January and reported this to the central government in Beijing by early February (Saich, 2003). An investigation team was quickly dispatched to Guangdong but civilian and military health experts were unable to agree on the nature of the virus until April 19 due to a lack of cooperation (Puska, 2005). Even within the civilian health authority, researchers affiliated with the central and provincial medical institutes disputed over the right measure of treatment, which led to avoidable exposure to the virus in hospitals that followed the wrong advice (Puska, 2005). The statistics on the number of infections also faced the same problem. It was not until late April that the number of infections announced by the civilian health authority began to include those patients admitted by military hospitals, which resulted in significant underreporting compared with the updated statistics adjusted after April 20. Without accurate information, even the leadership in Beijing had to wait for information to be synthesised before making any decisive actions. According to a credible source in Beijing, the head of the CCP's General Office once consulted the Health Minister on the overall infectious situation so that he could then decide whether or not to take quarantine measures in Zhongnanhai (the CCP headquarters), but the Health Minister was

unable to provide accurate information because that was also what he was trying to find out⁴⁴.

While the virus was spreading, the efficacy of this closed-door approach was challenged by both international and domestic stakeholders (even by reform-minded officials within the Chinese political system). The first wave of panic erupted in Guangdong, shortly after the Guangdong authorities reported the virus to Beijing. Short messages suggesting that there was a ‘deadly flu’ in Guangzhou were forwarded by mobile phone users millions of times within three days (Life Weekly, 2003a). People rushed to buy all sorts of things that were said to be able to resist SARS, such as herbal medicines for treating cold, vinegar and mosquito coils (believed to kill germs), antibiotics and face masks. Although much of this information was exaggerated or simply untrue, and the panic buying was unnecessary, without transparent information, people still opted to believe this false information (because this was the only type of information that was widely available). The credibility of the government fell dramatically.

In hindsight, the main source of pressure that forced the Chinese leadership to act decisively actually came from the international community. The WHO, which initially dealt with the Chinese government very patiently, eventually issued travel advisories for Guangdong and Hong Kong. This was followed by a flurry of cancellations and postponements of high profile international events, such as the World Economic Forum China Business Summit and the Rolling Stones concert (Puska, 2005). Foreigners living in Beijing also started to flee. China’s international image was tarnished.

For much of the period between March and April 2003, the central and Guangdong governments released more (carefully filtered) information on SARS at press conferences but they reiterated that the virus was not serious. Nonetheless, the steadily rising publicly

⁴⁴ The author’s interview with an anonymous scholar in the policy circle.

released infections figure implied a different conclusion contrary to the official statement that everything was under effective control. The civilian health authority certainly understood that kept saying everything was fine would be unconvincing, but it had more important and delicate factors which must be taken into account. In fact, the civilian health authority was aware of the seriousness of the situation but could not do much about it before consulting other institutionally more powerful departments. This was even more so, given that the time when the SARS crisis emerged coincided with the political high season of the PRC – the 10th NPC was underway in March in Beijing. Traditionally, during NPC sessions media outlets were told to mainly report positive news and focus on the conference itself so as to create a favourable environment for the NPC. The civilian health authority certainly did not want to be the troublemaker which disclosed negative news that could potentially disrupt the high politics.

Moreover, the 10th NPC was of something special in the PRC's history – it marked the completion of the civilian leadership power transition from the CCP's third generation of leadership, headed by Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji, to the fourth generation, led by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao⁴⁵. Power transitions in authoritarian regimes were often uneasy. These power transitions often triggered or were accompanied by political turmoil, as seen in China in 1976 and 1989. The transition from the third to the fourth generation by then was relatively smooth, suggesting a transformation towards a more regularised regime in terms of legal-rational legitimacy (Weatherley, 2006). However, a contingent event such as SARS could create opportunities for individual leaders, mainly Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, to demonstrate their clout. The showing up of their relative strengths and weaknesses could potentially change the subtle balance of power between the two leaders and disrupt the

⁴⁵ Jiang Zemin did not give up his chairmanship of the Central Military Commission until September 2004. Nonetheless, the handover of state and government power between the two generations was completed in March 2003 at the 10th NPC.

power transition. The political risk of leaking negative news at this critical juncture was thus extremely high.

On April 3, the Health Minister Zhang Wenkang held a press conference at which this highest ranking health official claimed that there were only 12 SARS cases in Beijing in total. He stressed again that SARS was under control and therefore ‘China is a safe place to work, tour and live’ (Xinhua, 2003a). However, the actual situation was already grave and hundreds more people were infected by the virus on a daily basis. Zhang’s lie was met by fury within China and beyond. A few days after the controversial press conference, Dr. Jiang Yanyong, a respected military surgeon, provided authentic information to CCTV and the Hong Kong based Phoenix TV that there were more than 140 SARS patients in three military hospitals alone (Life Weekly, 2003b). This information was then exposed by the foreign media such as the Time Magazine and the Wall Street Journal. Subsequently, the WHO issued a travel advisory for Beijing. At the same time, Southeast Asian countries took measures to restrict incoming travellers from China. International isolation put further pressure on the Chinese government to take actions.

4.3.5 Public Panic and Government under Mounting Pressure

Within China, the circulation of western media reports on SARS among the Chinese public via websites and text messages fuelled another wave of panic. Thousands of university students and migrant workers fled from Beijing unstoppably and this large scale movement of people made it even harder to control the spread of the virus. It was worth mentioning that this unprecedented escape could be partly attributed to the unequal access to healthcare. The ‘floating population’, such as migrant workers without permanent resident permits of Beijing, would have to pay the health costs at the unsubsidised rate that was

much higher than what Beijing permanent residents would have to pay. Migrant workers fled Beijing partly because they feared being contracted SARS as much as they worried about the inability to pay for the health costs once contracted the virus.

People also rebuked the government's deception and ironically compared the Health Minister Zhang Wenkang with Al-Sahhaf (the former Iraqi Information Minister who spoke for the Saddam Hussein regime during the 2003 Iraqi War) since they were both thorough liars (China Review, 2004).

By mid April, a national pandemic and a full blown political crisis were both underway. Both the healthcare system and the political system could no longer withstand the pressure brought about by SARS. The top leadership was apparently unconvinced by the conclusion that SARS was under control, as evidenced by Hu and Wen's urgent tones during their hospital inspection visits in Guangdong and Beijing. Their visits to the front line of fighting SARS and consultations with non-Party experts also suggested their desire to get first hand information which had been distorted by the fragmented political system. Furthermore, the propaganda apparatus was starting to cultivate a sense of national crisis among the public using extensive coverage on fighting SARS, which foreshadowed a decisive action to break the deadlock.

4.4 The Political Utility of SARS

As argued in Chapter 2 that crisis was not necessarily a wholly negative thing because danger was also represented by opportunities. The SARS crisis highlighted the problems with the routines and therefore generated some new thinking. More importantly, SARS provided a site for the confluence of pressure to alter these routines. In the following section, the author argues that the CCP has successfully utilised the SARS crisis as a

catalyst for reforms: shaking up the Party-state apparatus and improving administrative structures, introducing the SDC as a paradigm shift, reconnecting with the people and learning from the crisis.

4.4.1 The Centralisation of Power and the Shake-up of the Political System

SARS elevated into a political crisis mostly because of the administrative fragmentation within the political system. As such, the immediate task for the crisis leadership was to bind the system together and synthesise efforts. Crisis could be conveniently utilised to centralise power and circumvent established procedures, as well as bypassing the inter-agency bargaining in the bureaucracy that prevailed in the ‘normal politics’ (Rosenthal, 1988). Moreover, the multilayered structure of the Chinese state consisted of a five-level hierarchy of dyadic principal-agent relationships and this complicated linkage between the centre and localities created conditions that enabled cadres to engage in the act of ‘strategic disobedience’ (Wedeman, 2001:62). As a result, the Chinese political system had been heavily relying on periodic mobilisation and political campaigns for proper functioning because routine monitoring and ‘police patrolling’ were insufficient in controlling local malfeasance (Wedeman, 2001). Given these conditions, it was entirely understandable that the CCP leadership would utilise a crisis in order to instil a sense of urgency and shake up the (disobedient parts of the) system.

April 17 marked the turning point of the SARS crisis – Hu Jintao convened a PSC special session on SARS that called for the entire CCP to fight SARS in an all-out manner (Xinhua, 2003b). This meeting reinforced the message conveyed by a State Council special session on SARS held a few weeks earlier that the combat against SARS was the

overriding priority on the political agenda. The PSC special session also stressed the urgency of SARS and thus ordered to ‘centralise leadership and centralise command’ on fighting SARS (Xinhua, 2003b). This order immediately had the ‘rally around the flag’ effect. Soon after, a national taskforce on fighting SARS was set up, headed by China’s ‘Iron Lady’, Vice Premier Wu Yi (Xinhua, 2003e). At this time, civilian and military healthcare resources, as well as the Party’s mobilisation vehicle, were integrated for concerted efforts.

Once the fight against SARS became a political mission, national resources were soon mobilised and centralised. The Party-state relied on its extensive array of mobilisation vehicles established in the Mao era - village Party branches, neighbourhood committees and former barefoot doctors - ‘to take temperatures, quarantine people, trace infections, and round up laggards’ (Huang, 2005:129). Despite the uncompromising manner, these extraordinary (and in some cases, coercive) measures enabled the Chinese government to marshal whatever it had in a short period of time. The centralised command of fighting SARS unleashed formidable mobilisation capacity, which contributed the most to the effective containment of SARS within a few months. A remarkable example was that the Xiaotangshan Hospital solely designated for the SARS treatment was built in 7 days by over 7,000 construction workers (Southern Metropolis Daily, 2003).

While the campaign against SARS might sound old fashioned for some, the implementation of limited accountability was something new to the Chinese political system. Symbolic removals of the Health Minister (Zhang Wenkang) and the Beijing mayor (Meng Xuenong) manifested that although the CCP lacked a practicable and formalised mechanism for accountability at the time, an informal cadre management norm had emerged which stipulated that major mistakes by officials would lead to their dismissals. The removals of Zhang and Meng despite their high rankings also

demonstrated that the newly inaugurated leadership was treating SARS very seriously. Through these high profile dismissals, the leadership was obviously trying to rally the Party from top to bottom and warn those incompetent or disobedient cadres. In fact (and often less noticed), the CCP's disciplinary and organisational departments reinforced the enforcement of Party discipline and accordingly fired many officials at different levels because of their negligence or misreporting in fighting SARS (Xinhua, 2003d).

4.4.2 Shifting the Dominating Paradigm – From GDPism to the SDC

As mentioned above, another prominent cause of the SARS crisis was the problematic growth model. In fact, as early as during the 5th plenary session of the CCP's 15th Central Committee in 2000, the problem of unbalanced development had been already paid attention to, and the need for the 'new thinking' on development had been raised (Zhang Ning and Zhang Hefu, 2008). Major policies such as the 'Go West' development programme were implemented, but a comprehensive alternative development strategy was still in its formation. Since the new leadership took office at the 16th PC in 2002, early signs of a paradigm shift towards a new development strategy had already emerged. During public appearances, Hu and Wen spent more time touring China's vast hinterland, encouraging the economically most disadvantaged and shaking hands with AIDS patients. These signals could be interpreted as the new leadership's desires for a paradigm shift – they wanted to ensure that the ongoing reforms not only served the vested interest but also benefit more people, as well as ensuring that the development model would be more socio-economically and environmentally sustainable.

However, prior to SARS, the central government's anxiety about the need for an alternative development strategy was not shared to the same extent by local governments,

especially not by those economically powerful provinces where the single-minded pursuit of GDP had dominated policy agendas for a long time. However, without a major shock, it was hard to push for a change (Ngok, 2009). The alternative thinking on development could hardly take root when the current model looked fine from a short-term perspective. The sudden occurrence of SARS caught many local officials by surprise and forced them into thinking about the long term. Nevertheless, after these officials had the direct experience of SARS through witnessing the tragedy caused by the crisis of GDP-focused development, an alternative development paradigm that comprised more elements of social and human development should appeal to them. In other words, the SARS crisis paved the way for this alternative development paradigm.

Likewise, this idea of a new development paradigm that stressed social and human development should appeal to ordinary people after they experienced the SARS shock. This life-threatening public health crisis highlighted a lack of welfare spending which was curbed as a result of economic neoliberalism. The desire for a more responsible government thus emerged after SARS. In fact, state media explicitly tapped this popular desire by carefully framing the SARS crisis as something beyond a public health crisis, which made the people to reflect on the meaning of development. In some state-run TV programs in particular, heroic and touching stories about fighting SARS came first, followed by effusive praise for medical staff members who lost their lives. Commentaries about the broader picture were given afterwards – reflection about the inadequate provision of healthcare resources over the years, which induced people to rethink about other fundamental aspects of development in addition to GDP. Finally, ‘scientific development’ was presented as the cure for rectifying these problems and avoiding similar tragedies⁴⁶.

⁴⁶ The author’s observation from a CCTV-run programme in July 2003 in celebration of the victory in the fight against SARS.

The theoretical construction of the SDC was closely linked to people's desires for more balanced development and that the government should take on more responsibilities in enhancing the social safety net. The new concept emphasised, first and foremost, putting people first (Fewsmith, 2004b). In the aftermath of SARS, this people-centric orientation found resonance with people who had reconsidered the relationship between the accumulation of wealth and human development. The SDC was introduced at the right time as people's memories about SARS were still fresh.

At the 3rd plenary session of the CCP's 16th Central Committee, five months after the SARS crisis, the SDC was formally proposed and it soon became one of the most important guiding philosophies of the CCP. Without the SARS crisis, it would be unthinkable that the SDC was promoted to such high ideological status within a short period of time. Moreover, the SDC was soon highlighted as the Fourth Generation's major contribution to the CCP's ideology. In sum, the paradigm shift from GDPism to the SDC was born out of SARS.

4.4.3 Reconnecting with the People

Politicians often utilise crises to address issues beyond the crises themselves. As such, SARS was regarded by the Chinese leadership as something beyond a public health disaster. The initial inaction and poor handling of SARS severely damaged the Party's credibility because it illustrated that 'the CCP's priorities have become so intertwined with the Party's own survival' (Puska, 2005:87). Hence a decisive intervention had to be made in order to restore the Party's tarnished credibility. Also, the showing of benevolence by rulers in times of crisis was an indispensable element of moral legitimization for any Chinese

regime in the past (Shue, 2004). Given the CCP's long time self-constructed image as the people's saviour, it must make a drastic turn to reconnect with the people.

Following the watershed Politburo meeting held on April 17 (Xinhua, 2003b), government actions against SARS became highly visible. All nine members of the PSC had gone out of Zhongnanhai to inspect the Anti-SARS campaign and these leadership activities were extensively publicised by the state media (Gov.cn, 2005). Despite these symbolic actions, the government also took a step forward in terms of information transparency. It began to release daily updates on the number of SARS cases. Numerous press conferences were held to inform both Chinese citizens and the international community. State media were mobilised to cover extensively about SARS-related knowledge and on how to resist its transmissions. In the legal realm, the State Council issued the 'Decree on Responses to Emergency Public Health Situations' on May 12 with immediate effect. This new decree clearly defined the respective responsibilities of relevant government departments in the event of public health emergencies and how news relating to such situations should be reported (Zheng and Lye, 2004). It also stipulated that news on any public health emergencies should be reported within 1-2 hours of occurrences and those officials caught for deception would be punished and even subject to prosecution (Gov.cn, 2003). All these efforts were aimed to show the Party's highly responsible attitude towards public health and to restore public confidence.

More notable in the Party's efforts to re-engage with the people was the 'People's War' waged against SARS (Xinhua, 2003c). This reappearance of revolutionary era slogans was deemed a step backward by some analysts – a temporal return to the Maoist mass campaign. Nevertheless, if we took the issue of regime legitimacy into account, the labelling of a major mobilisation as a 'People's War' was clearly deliberate tactics deployed to bolster the popular legitimacy of the CCP. In this respect, Perry (2007) argues

that Maoist revolutionary legacies have not faded even though China is considered nowadays as an economic superpower. The traditional ruling tactics of the periodic mass mobilisation continues into the post-Mao, depoliticised era. Although in general people lack political involvement in this depoliticised era, during the mass mobilisation they are encouraged to participate in popular politics in a manner not threatening to the Party-state. In this way, their desires for political efficacy are satisfied during the mass mobilisation when they may feel themselves a part of the driving force for a common cause (and the common good). Allowing popular political participation therefore consolidates the CCP's political hegemony by enhancing the Party's mobilisation legitimacy (Weatherley, 2006).

4.5 Learning from Crisis

SARS and its aftermath might have proved that the Chinese political system was so resilient that it absorbed most of the impact of SARS (Fewsmith, 2003a). In addition, the government's crisis management capacity improved significantly as a result of learning from SARS, and these hard-learned lessons were embodied in a number of policy measures that were likely to improve the quality of governance in the long term. Just to name a few.

Firstly, the government's making of economic policies has become more social protection-oriented since SARS. For instance, the balancing of urban and rural development was accorded a high priority. The government allocated much more healthcare expenditure to the rural area to improve the disease control infrastructure there because SARS showed that the weakest link in containing the spread of the disease was in the countryside (Xinhua, 2004b). The implementation of the New Rural Cooperative Medical Scheme was therefore accelerated. Other complementary policies that aimed at relieving the financial burdens of peasants were also introduced, including the altogether

abolishment of agricultural tax in 2006. These measures were likely to enhance the capacity of peasants to resist adversities such as SARS (Zheng and Lye, 2004).

Secondly, administrative reforms, especially those related to emergency responses, have gained momentum after SARS. To avoid the sort of chaotic response like what happened in SARS, emergency response centres were set up in the entire administrative apparatus. The State Council had a new emergency management office. Central government ministries and local governments set up emergency management centres of various capacity and each had its own emergency response plan. In March 2008, the State Council initiated another round of administrative restructuring by establishing several 'super ministries' through the merge of ministries that had overlapping responsibilities. This initiative was likely to improve coordination of work in times of crisis. At the same time, the study of crisis management was paid more attention to. Academic institutes, such as the Tsinghua University, launched programmes in crisis management which made crisis management a popular discipline in public management. The CCP's organisational department decided in 2008 to send all China's county party secretaries to the Central Party School to study crisis management (Wang, 2008a).

Lastly, new laws on emergency management were enacted and existing laws relating to public emergencies underwent substantial legislative revisions. These legislative measures profoundly affected the ways in which crises were handled, and removed a lot of legal impediments and political taboos regarding the reporting of crisis. For example, the Law for Dealing with Emergencies defined four warning levels according to the extent of potential damage and stipulated the preventive measures associated with each warning level. This law also permitted crucial information to be reported directly to the central government if that became necessary (Gov.cn, 2007b). Also, death tolls in natural disasters were no longer regarded as state secrets after amendments to the state secret classification

system were made in 2005 (People's Daily, 2005). In 2007, two important sentences that might impede autonomous disaster reporting were deleted when the proposal of the Law for Dealing with Emergencies was submitted to the NPC Standing Committee. One deleted sentence was 'media outlets should not release information about emergencies against regulations or without authorisation', the other sentence was 'government manages the media's news reporting' (People's Net, 2007a). This was not to say that disaster reporting would be free from interference. Instead, it was a gesture showing that the government had learnt the lesson from SARS. The deletion of these deterrence clauses was meant to give journalists some sort of legal backing if autonomous disaster reporting led them into trouble. In the same year, the Decree on Open Government Information was enacted, which stipulated citizens' access to government information and the obligation of the government to release information (Xinhua, 2007b).

Between 2003 and 2008, these concrete results of crisis learning were tested, implemented and modified in the handling of various crises. Such as the 2005 Songhua River pollution, the 2008 winter storm and the 2008 Shandong train crash. Government performance was broadly, if not evenly, consistent with these new measures.

4.6 Limitations of Learning from Crisis

The aforementioned measures introduced after SARS had produced concrete positive outcomes in crisis management, notably manifested in the relief work of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake. The government's initial response to the Sichuan earthquake exhibited high responsiveness, transparent information and a more open media environment comparing to that of SARS. However, there were a number of areas where the effects of crisis learning was constrained by the current settings of the political system.

To elaborate on this question, it was helpful to review the three major contradictions which had existed prior to SARS, and to assess how well these problems were addressed. The second problem: the fragmentation within the political system, was addressed relatively well. However, as mentioned above and as was seen in crises such as the 2008 winter storm and the Sichuan Earthquake, the institutional deadlock was often broken as a result of the presence of political heavyweights rather than as a result of formal institutions. Government departments were integrated, but not enough. An overarching and powerful commanding centre that could bring all crisis management matters under one roof, i.e. something akin to the former US Federal Emergency Management Administration (Saich, 2003), or the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations, had yet to be established.

The government's record of altering the growth model was mixed. New concepts such as the SDC and the Green GDP were introduced, but there lacked a mechanism as established as the performance contract, to actually assess officials' performance on social development. In other words, there was not enough incentive within the nomenklatura system to promote the new paradigm. The only change so far had been to spend more money on a specific social protection issue when something went seriously wrong. However, the more important ideational change regarding the balanced development had yet to come. In particular, some less developed provinces still had to swing between 'the economic task of generating growth and a political task of promoting development' (Breslin, 2008b:218).

On state-society relations, improvements were also limited. In various post-SARS crises, the government initially exhibited some openness but as soon as the crisis was over, there was a strong tendency for a return to the pre-crisis status quo. This could be explained by the contradictions between empowering people on the one hand while keeping the grip on power on the other, and the gradual fading of openness manifested the

Party's very inclination to 'grip' instead of 'empower'. It was entirely understandable that any forms of political participation had to be within the bound set by the state. But if the political system became too defensive, channels of reliable information, talents and societal inputs which were crucial in the post-crisis recovery, might be blocked.

4.7 Conclusion

At the fourth plenary session of the CCP's 16th Central Committee convened in 2004, a resolution aimed at consolidating the Party's ruling capacity was passed. As the risk society came to China, the sound ability of crisis management during a far-reaching transformation was a crucial component of the ruling capacity. Given the current settings of the Chinese political system, major impetus to reforms were more likely to materialise after major crises. As discussed in the above case study of the SARS epidemic, that a crisis, if defined, framed and managed well, could have multifaceted utility that coincided with the policy preferences of the political leadership: 'a constant improvement and optimisation of the population as a strategy for economic and political development' (Thornton, 2009:29). This was certainly not to imply that the more crises the better. Instead, it suggested that when a crisis inevitably occurred, broader thinking and a long-term vision could help to push for the reform and the preferred agenda while defusing the crisis itself. As a result, crisis management was likely to continue as one of the powerful tools in the CCP's arsenal of ruling strategies to tackle intractable problems and improve the quality of governance in the years to come. In the next two chapters, we would see more examples where crises were utilised by the CCP through the maximum tinkering of the current system, in order to demonstrate to the people that the CCP rule was good and therefore should be maintained.

Chapter 5: Case Study Two: The Sichuan Earthquake

5.1 Introduction

The Sichuan earthquake was not only the largest crisis (in terms of damage and casualties) faced by the Hu-Wen leadership, but arguably the best managed crisis during their ten years in tenure. This chapter critically reviews its trajectory, from the relief effort through to reconstruction, in light of the analytical framework established in Chapter 2 on the political utility of crisis. It attempts to address a number of questions concerning the CCP's crisis behaviour. For example, why did the Chinese government (under the same leadership) act so quickly such that its responsiveness stood in stark contrast with the initial inertia during the SARS crisis we just studied? What domestic or international factors were decisive in realising the unprecedented transparency of information, international openness and civic effervescence? Was it the contingent factor of the Beijing Olympics, or an expected outcome of protracted domestic efforts towards these goals since China's reform and opening in the 1980s? And more fundamentally, what made the CCP switch on and off the valve of political liberalisation within a short period of time?

The Sichuan earthquake was not a new type of crisis. Natural disasters are arguably the type of crisis about which the Chinese government is most confident in dealing with and for which it is most prepared. The key in managing major natural disasters, namely through large scale mobilisation and logistical support, has a natural fit with the CCP's Leninist structure of command and control. Nevertheless, the 'conventionality' of the

Sichuan earthquake did not reduce its significance for a closer investigation. The timing of its occurrence mattered, which lent it considerable comparability in relation to other crises. For example, when comparing disaster responses to the Sichuan earthquake and the Tangshan earthquake in 1976, the response to the Sichuan earthquake looked very different from that of the Tangshan earthquake. Although technological, social and political realities that had changed beyond recognition over the three decades were apparent explanations to these differences, the Sichuan earthquake still had some distinctiveness deserved for further analysis. Note that it was the first major crisis after China had established an institutionalised crisis management regime at the national level which included a comprehensive contingency plan, designated organisations for crisis management, the clarity of agency responsibilities and a law for emergency response (Zhong, 2009). It was also the first major crisis confronted by the consolidated Hu-Wen leadership. These factors all helped us to ‘test’ the government performance during the Sichuan earthquake and to see whether any learning from the SARS crisis materialised, or whether high politics remained a decisive variable in determining crisis responsiveness. In addition, the Sichuan earthquake serves as a good point of reference when we look at the milk scandal in the next chapter. Only by then can we be sure about whether the Sichuan earthquake was a routine case or an ‘outlier’ in the CCP’s crisis management.

5.2 The Earthquake and the Government Response

The earthquake occurred in Wenchuan County, Sichuan Province and measured 8.0 on the Richter scale; it was so strong that the tremors were felt in all regions in China except Jilin, Heilongjiang and Xinjiang (China Daily, 2008a; Xinhua, 2008b). The death toll as of 11

November 2008 was nearly 70,000, with another 18,000 listed as missing. More than 374,000 people were injured (Xinhua, 2008w). The earthquake severely damaged buildings and other infrastructure in Sichuan and nearby provinces, resulting in a direct economic loss of ¥845.1 bn (more than \$120 bn) (Xinhua, 2008j). According to Premier Wen Jiabao, the Sichuan Earthquake was the most devastating earthquake in the history of the PRC, even more severe than the Tangshan earthquake in 1976 (Xinhua, 2008n).

5.2.1 Responsiveness

The reporting of the earthquake was rapid by international standards, and unusual by Chinese standards given its notorious record of blacking out news reporting on natural disasters in the past. Such speed reflected a genuine improvement in media openness that we mentioned in Chapter 3, let alone the significant improvements in information gathering and processing. At 14:46, eighteen minutes after the tremors at 14:28, the state news agency, Xinhua, released the first official reporting on the earthquake (Xinhua, 2008q). The report was brief, but indicated the intensity (initially measured at 7.8, raised to 8.0 in the same evening) and epicentre (Wenchuan County) (China Daily, 2008a; Xinhua, 2008q). Meanwhile, CCTV started its 24 hours, non-stop, live coverage of the disaster. The in time media coverage suggested that legislative and regulatory revisions after the SARS crisis regarding the reporting of natural disasters have brought about concrete progress.

5.2.2 Accountability

In the meantime, the Chinese leadership responded rapidly and gave disaster relief overriding importance in the political process. General Secretary Hu Jintao issued a

directive calling for a timely rescue (Xinhua, 2008w). Premier Wen Jiabao arrived at the scene fewer than five hours after the quake (Legal Daily, 2008) – in part for public relations, as he had been regarded as the most benevolent and caring leader among the fourth generation leadership, but mostly in anticipation of a chaotic situation in which inter-agency infighting and local incomppliance with central government orders would prevail that could cause delays in rescue in the absence of a political heavyweight.

While Wen was overseeing the rescue work on site, Hu Jintao in Beijing took overall charge of the relief effort. He centralised power scattered throughout the Party, the state and the military through the PSC which ensured rapid responsiveness by the whole Party-state apparatus, which was vital when tens of thousands of lives were at stake. He convened two PSC meetings within 3 days after the earthquake (Xinhua, 2008f; 2008e)⁴⁷. The first meeting set the relief work as the top priority and called for mitigating the impact of the earthquake by whatever means. A national taskforce for earthquake relief was established, headed by Premier Wen Jiabao (Xinhua, 2008f). The second meeting, held shortly ahead of the first 72 hours⁴⁸ following the earthquake, stressed that ‘as long as there is even a little hope, we must make every effort to save lives’. It also indicated potential problems that must be addressed, such as delivering more relief supplies and the prevention of epidemics (Xinhua, 2008e).

5.2.3 The Civilian-Military Cooperation

Having learnt the lesson from SARS in which the military’s reluctance to share information with departments in the civilian government undermined the concerted efforts

⁴⁷ The PSC is the supreme decision making body of the PRC, normally PSC meetings are only held once a week.

⁴⁸ According to worldwide experience, the first 72 hours after an earthquake is a watershed in terms of life saving, most people under ruins are less likely to survive without food and water once the first 72 hours have elapsed.

to fight SARS, and after the PLA was blamed for its slow response in the winter storm in January 2008⁴⁹, this time the military acted swiftly and was in much better cooperation with the civilian rescue force. This swift cooperation was achieved as a result of the abovementioned PSC meetings that brought scattered rescue forces under one roof. It also signified Hu Jintao's considerable consolidation of power as he was able to command the gun in a short space of time⁵⁰. Meanwhile, China's armed forces – including the PLA, the armed police, and the reserve forces – were fully mobilised immediately to take part in the rescue. Chen Bingde, the PLA's Chief of General Staff, recalled that he issued the first order of the manoeuvre of troops as early as 15:40 on 12 May, about an hour after the quake (Xinhua, 2008w). At 19:20, he added, 'reserve forces can go to the affected area without seeking approval. The PLA troops on active duty can go while they report and all troops in the surrounding area can be mobilised'. On 13 May, as many as 11,420 soldiers were transported to Sichuan by air (many of them were transported there by civil airliners), breaking the record for the number of soldiers sent by air on one single day in the PLA's history (Elite Reference, 2008). Within several days, more than 140,000 soldiers were sent to the affected area (Xinhua, 2008z).

5.2.4 Media Transparency

The earthquake happened eleven days after the implementation of the Decree on Open Government Information. The media did a good job in reporting the disaster, as well as

⁴⁹ A massive snow storm hit central China in January–February 2008 and paralysed many parts of the transportation network there. The PLA was only manoeuvred after the disaster had caused severe damage. The delay in the deployment of the PLA prompted speculations about the coordination problem between the civilian government and the military in crisis management.

⁵⁰ It should be made clear that the disagreement and confusion over whether the civilian government should have control of the military in a natural disaster rescue that had allegedly arisen was between the PLA and Wen Jiabao, and not between the PLA and Hu Jintao. The PLA vowed to listen to the Party and Chairman Hu at the very beginning, at least the media coverage of the PLA's activities was not contradictory to this statement of loyalty.

conveying sympathy and rallying support for the victims; this was especially true for media outlets in mainland China. Thanks to China's unprecedented media openness during the first week or so following the earthquake, Chinese media had the opportunity to demonstrate to foreign counterparts its professionalism, as opposed to the stereotypical perception that Chinese media were merely the government's mouthpiece. 'This is the first time the Chinese media has lived up to international standards', said Shi Anbin, Professor of Media at Tsinghua University (Los Angeles Times, 2008a). As usual, the Central Propaganda Department reportedly issued a directive asking journalists not to go to the affected area and use only press releases from Xinhua. Such directives were ignored. Hundreds of journalists still went to Sichuan, by air, by bus or even on foot, and they sent back first-hand reports about the damage (Zhang Jieping, 2008). But the Chinese authorities refrained from recalling these journalists.

For foreign journalists, this time they found their reporting activities almost unrestricted. Local governments issued them with reporting permits and offered other help, including even at one point taking them to the affected area on a military helicopter. This degree of openness stood in stark contrast to the traditional information culture of secrecy, since, in the recent past, western reporters had often been regarded as spies by many Chinese officials (Los Angeles Times, 2008b). The access they were given was also unprecedented: 'As long as the road was undamaged, we were allowed to go in' said one western reporter (Zhang Jieping, 2008).

5.2.5 International Openness

This new level of transparency allowed foreign reporters to release timely reports which facilitated a huge number of donations from abroad (Hui, 2009). As previously mentioned,

China's rescue was praised by an International Federation of the Red Cross official for its rapidness and efficiency, but he also added, 'we can't expect that the government can do everything and handle every aspect of the needs' owing to the magnitude of the quake and the scale of the damage (BBC, 2008d). This may partly explain why China decided to accept international aid. The following day after the quake – when the severity of the disaster had been raised from Level 2 to Level 1 (the highest level) and the death toll had already exceeded 12,000 and was set to rise – China announced that it 'cordially appreciate and welcome assistance from the international community' (Xinhua, 2008a). As of 4 June 2008, the international community contributed a total of ¥3.555 bn (more than \$500 million) and material donations worth ¥1.154 bn (more than \$165 million) (MOCA, 2008). The overseas Chinese community also contributed more than ¥1.3 bn (\$187 million) (Bo, 2010).

More symbolic was the presence of foreign rescue and medical teams on Chinese grounds for the first time. The decision to accept foreign rescue teams was probably made at the second PSC meeting on the evening of 14 May (Bo, 2010). The following morning, China expressed its willingness to accept foreign rescue teams. The first rescue team that arrived in Sichuan was from Japan, a team with plentiful experience in earthquake rescues both in its own country and abroad. The very fact that the Japanese – who had once invaded China and brought indelible trauma to the country – were allowed into the country to rescue the Chinese people was in its own right symbolic in that it represented the remarkable ease of diplomatic tensions. Rescue teams from Russia, South Korea and Singapore arrived shortly afterwards. Nine other countries also sent medical teams with a total number of 223 medical staff to the quake-stricken area (MOCA, 2008).

5.2.6 Social Cohesion and Civic Participation

For a long time it was commonly thought that the uncertainty of the socio-economic transformation eroded Chinese civic consciousness (Wang, 2004a), but the tremendous help that the Chinese public offered to the earthquake victims suggested that sympathy was still pervasive at a time of crisis. People made donations at their workplace, in neighbourhoods and in shops; school children and even beggars donated; long queues of people standing in front of blood donating stations quickly filled blood banks. Until 30 April 2009, donations worth ¥76.712 bn (more than \$11 bn) had been received⁵¹.

If the mounting donations after a disaster were usual in Chinese society, then the politically more significant, autonomous civil participation in the aftermath of a disaster was clearly unseen before. Millions of volunteers marched to the quake zone at considerable personal risk. Organised by clubs, societies, associations and businesses or even went there on their own, people participated in delivery distribution, basic medical care, psychological help and so on. These activities complemented the state-led relief effort and filled many gaps with which the state was too busy to deal. Moreover, through ‘learning by doing’ during the relief effort, these civil organisations enhanced their capacity and publicity, as well as learning how to work better with the local state, the broader society and also with each other (Teets, 2009). Every wealthy province and city in other parts of China was assigned to help a corresponding region in the quake-stricken area. By late 2010, most of the reconstruction work was completed (Sichuan Daily, 2010).

5.3 The Political Utility of the Sichuan Earthquake

⁵¹ This statistics also included overseas donations, however, there was neither follow up statistics regarding total domestic donations nor total overseas donations respectively.

The above section outlined the major factual development of the earthquake. To a certain extent, the Sichuan earthquake differed from the other two cases studied in this thesis because the very hazard of this crisis was largely natural, whereas the other two crises originated largely from human errors. The earthquake seemed more apolitical, as suggested by the conviction of many scholars that ‘there shouldn’t be a politics of disaster’ (Olson, 2000:266). However, when we took a closer look at the series of events around the Sichuan earthquake through contextual and historical lenses, these extraordinary events were not merely pure ‘facts’ or apolitical occurrences. Indeed, they were highly politicised and parallel with historical records. This section thus seeks to deconstruct the Sichuan earthquake out of the ‘facts’ and explore the political motivation underlying the crisis management strategies. Of course, to speculate about the politics at work during a humanitarian crisis was unsettling, because this government performed better than ever before on disaster relief in professional terms. But our analysis will go beyond the government’s manipulation or diversions in the course of managing this disaster, since more pragmatic and progressive elements can also be found. It is therefore helpful to analyse critically the political utility associated with this crisis along with the crisis itself. Such analysis will uncover how the Sichuan earthquake was uniquely placed in China’s recent political trajectory and will help to explain the more general pattern of Chinese crisis management.

5.3.1 Shifting the Dominating Paradigm(s)

In managing the Sichuan earthquake, there were two paradigm shifts that could be observed. The first one concerned the immediate media transparency. The second one was about openness, and was closely linked to the first but placed a particular emphasis on

China's open attitude in relation to the international community, a long-awaited, confident gesture commensurate with China's great power status. Both paradigm shifts, however, took the form of gradual change along path dependent trajectories, i.e. they were creeping instead of drastic shifts. However, it was the extraordinary situation in the Sichuan earthquake that catalysed the pinnacle of both shifts.

I. The Media Surge – A Long March to Transparency

The media surge in the aftermath of the earthquake was the culmination of a steady process over several decades of rebalance in the demand and supply of information, and of the right to know. Nevertheless, as we discussed in Chapter 3 on state control of information, the CCP did not always play a passive role by merely meeting new social demands. Rather, it has struggled actively to shape and manage this demand. Certainly, all of this has been carried out pragmatically and in accordance with the goal of ensuring the CCP's political hegemony.

As we have already discussed the evolution of censorship in general in Chapter 3, here we only compare the Sichuan earthquake with similar disasters in the past so that we have a clearer focus on how transparency improved. The 1976 Tangshan Earthquake was a devastating disaster, comparable to the Sichuan Earthquake in magnitude. In the news reporting after the quake, no details were mentioned – not even the quake's magnitude or what damage it caused. The death toll was not reported until three years after the earthquake (China.com, 2005). The main reason not to report was the fear of social instability, originating partly from the perception that the earthquake implied the CCP's losing of the mandate of heaven (Gries and Rosen, 2004). Moreover, the earthquake rescue

was soon turned into a propaganda vehicle to promote a nationalist sentiment that centred upon the inculcation of Maoist doctrine on self-reliance and resilience.

The 2003 SARS crisis we studied in the previous chapter was another comparable crisis. Although it was not a natural disaster, the origin of the crisis was a natural disease. In fact, disaster reporting had already become habitual prior to SARS owing to persistent efforts on liberalising the media in the Deng and Jiang eras which nurtured a path dependency towards more transparency. As a result, the Chinese government suffered from a credibility crisis when it attempted a transparency backslide during SARS. Owing to the ongoing but somewhat unsettled leadership transition, Party and state bureaucrats were excessively concerned with the Party's own comfort rather than the wellbeing of the people. When the people were extraordinarily anxious about the virus, there had been no honest clarification for five months. Opaque information created much of the instability that it was meant to prevent. Empowered by the Internet and mobile telecommunications, the Chinese people expressed their deep concerns to the foreign media as well as among themselves. The Chinese government could not resist the resultant mounting pressure and was forced to take a drastic turn by releasing the concealed information by late April 2003.

The SARS crisis had a profound impact on the evolving state-society information flow. At one level, the state would find itself in a more embarrassing position vis-à-vis the informed Chinese public, if it attempted an information blackout. First, as the evidence of temporary social unrest during SARS had shown, the government could not afford to step backwards by suspending the evolution towards information transparency. The constantly rising expectations of the Chinese public regarding the government's commitment to the 'right to know' would not allow such a backslide. Second, in an information age, the state's system of information control had more and more loopholes, and as such its dominant position as the provider and disseminator of information were both weakened.

The state had learnt to ride on the tide of the information revolution rather than stem it. However sophisticated its filtering system might be, it had to operate that system according to this general tide and could only control the speed of information dissemination.

On another level, crisis communication was very important to crisis management and regime legitimacy. This was especially true in terms of how effectively to inform those who would potentially be affected by the crisis. The golden rule of corporate crisis communication: ‘tell it all, tell it fast and tell the truth’ – also applied to social and political crises. However, the CCP’s performance fell far short in this regard and missed the opportunity to enhance legitimacy for much of the period until the underreporting of SARS was acknowledged. Moreover, the Chinese public voted with their feet when they found the Party to be so self-concerned during the crisis. Although the blunder was rectified later to some extent, the damage to the Party’s image as well as to China’s image globally was inevitable. Both led to a deficit in Party legitimacy. As a result, the Party had to demonstrate its commitment to open information as well as preparing well for the next crisis.

In the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake, we saw a dramatic change in the control of information when the earthquake was viewed in relation to SARS. Despite the apparent media surge – unprecedented access, speed and depth of reports, for example – there were more encouraging elements in the government’s handling of information which were worth investigating and which distinguished the earthquake from SARS.

The first element was how information was disseminated. After the government waged a battle against SARS, there was no doubt that it mobilised its propaganda apparatus to convey the disease-related information in an all-out manner. Nonetheless, information flow was largely one way and top down – i.e. from the authorities to the citizens in very much a paternalistic fashion, and citizens were ‘taught’ the dos and don’ts,

similar in style to the heavy handed, uncompromising, mass campaign for sanitation swept across China simultaneously. In this regard, the media remained to a large degree the state's political education instrument. In the earthquake, the flow of information between state and society became much more interactive. There were numerous occasions where the state deliberately gathered information from the grassroots in order to improve its relief work; an often cited instance was when the rescue helicopter could not find a suitable landing pad in the epicentre, a local student put up a post on the Internet and suggested an appropriate location and the helicopter eventually landed there (Xinhua, 2008c). We also saw that state-run web portals set up bulletin boards to update in real time about various supply needs. In short, the state not only exchanged information with those at the grassroots level, but used the extensive array of its propaganda machinery to help the grassroots to relay information. Without the state's help, this crucial information would have taken much longer to deliver and may only have reached a much smaller audience.

The second element was how information was clarified. In the fight against SARS, the state discourse dominated the public sphere even after it stopped lying. It was close-ended and hegemonic. In the earthquake, the state's discourse was much more open-ended. The state adopted a listening mode through responding to grassroots agenda-setting and through clarifying information. This approach proved to work in easing tensions and enhanced government credibility. For instance, in the morning following the quake, there were rumours going around attacking the government's slow response. But when the state television showed the image of completely destroyed roads to the epicentre, many stopped blaming the government (People's Net, 2008c). In addition, at press conferences, officials responded to contentious issues – such as the perceived failure of earthquake prediction and shoddy school construction – with straight answers. For the former, they explained the internationally recognised difficulties and complexities of predicting earthquakes. For the

latter, they did not rule out the possibility of corruption involved. Although their explanations might not have been fully convincing, speaking frankly on these topics was a step forward. Moreover, the state even used grassroots-supplied information on the Internet to tackle a corruption scandal involving the distribution of tents (Southern Metropolis Daily, 2008). In short, although it would be over-optimistic to suggest the flourishing of civil society discourses regarding the earthquake, there was plenty of evidence to suggest the state's acceptance of a grassroots voice, and its important role in checking the relief work of local governments.

The final element was the kind of information that was disseminated. The contrast between SARS and the earthquake was particularly sharp in this regard. In the battle against SARS, the activities of the Chinese leadership and heroic stories received the most news coverage, which were typical of a patriotic campaign. In the earthquake relief, media outlets and especially the state media showed a very humane face. During the first few days following the quake, the central theme had been life saving. The ordinary people – the victims and rescue workers alike – became the central focus of the media. Reports produced by the state media were characterised by care and sympathy, and leadership activities no longer dominated the television and newspapers. These reports looked just like disaster reporting in the west. Also, in the past, reports tended to treat disaster victims as one whilst individual character and personal suffering were either obscured or neglected. However, this time the narrative focus shifted from the 'indistinguishable collective' to the 'unique individual', and a more humane perspective was used instead of a political one (Dong et al, 2010). This change reflected that the emphasis on 'taking people first', the pivotal principle embedded in the SDC advocated after SARS, has taken effect.

All in all, the Sichuan earthquake represented a paradigm shift in media transparency. The largely non-intervention attitude of the government, especially towards

non-state-run media outlets, facilitated a media surge that conveyed unprecedented sympathy and unity in the country. This did not appear to be a new paradigm, but considering that the government refrained from the usual oppression – i.e. stayed away from the routine – it qualified as a paradigm shift. Moreover, the government demonstrated its respect for lives and human dignity alongside with the media transparency. Together, these produced a dramatic shift away from SARS. But, if viewed in a broader historical context, this shift was not as dramatic. Instead, it was the result of a creeping shift towards media transparency. The path dependency of media transparency shaped by prior events during the last three decades garnered considerable momentum which was unleashed after the Sichuan earthquake.

II. Unprecedented Openness – Behave Like a Responsible Great Power

This section concerns China's changed gesture to the international community during the earthquake relief. Like the gradual progress in transparency, openness did not happen overnight. In fact, China accepted or even formally requested international aid as early as 1980⁵² and 1991 respectively (Chai and Ma, 2010). Even in the SARS crisis when the Chinese government seemed extremely uncooperative, it allowed the WHO investigation and research teams to visit China before its acknowledgment of underreporting. Given this path dependency, unprecedented openness during the earthquake therefore did not seem surprising. However, this was not to suggest its inevitability, and several factors that made this happen should not be neglected.

The first such factor was China's long-term effort in establishing itself as a responsible great power. This effort started after the Asian financial crisis when China

⁵² Before 1980, China only accepted very limited personal donations from abroad when disasters occurred, but no inter-governmental aid was accepted.

pledged not to depreciate the Renminbi. Gradually a discourse on responsible great power has evolved to become China's new foreign policy doctrine. New concepts such as 'peaceful rise', 'peaceful development' and 'harmonious world' were developed and elaborated on and they have become catchphrases in China's diplomacy. At the same time, from the international community there was also demand on China that it should behave in a way commensurate with its global economic and political strength. The most cited among them was Robert Zoellick's 2005 speech in which he urged China to become a 'responsible stakeholder' in the international system (Zoellick, 2005). Despite its initial blunder in SARS, generally speaking, China's behaviour in international interactions has become more considerate and disciplined as China's role in facilitating the Six Party Talk and in settling disputes in the South China Sea with ASEAN countries has showed. Moreover, it was logical to argue that the notion of being responsible in the international community was meaningless if such pledged responsibility did not extend to include China's own citizens. In other words, any good conduct of a country in the international arena had to be based on treating its own people in a reasonable and acceptable manner. Ironically, the more prominent China's benefactor image abroad was, the sharper contrast it presented vis-à-vis China's thrifty attitude towards its own people. From time to time there were Internet discussions talking caustically about China writing off billions in African debt on the one hand, but spending inadequately in China's own countryside on the other. The discord made Chinese aid look more purposeful abroad as well as generating discontent at home. As a result, the Chinese leadership responded subtly to this discord, stressing the importance of social harmony and promising to make people 'live with more happiness and dignity' (Xinhua, 2010e).

When it came to the Sichuan Earthquake, there was nothing more important than the mobilisation of domestic and international resources to save lives. It was exactly for

this reason that experienced international rescue teams were allowed to go to the quake zone. There were minimal ideological factors attached as long as foreign teams could help. Symbolically, rescue teams from Japan and Taiwan (regarded by many in China as hostile neighbours) were allowed in despite the fact that Japan decided at the last minute to use a civil airliner instead of a Defence Force C130 cargo aircraft to deliver rescue supplies⁵³. It also confirmed the point that a major natural disaster might pacify bilateral tensions and facilitate the building-up of trust (Pelling and Dill, 2009).

This open gesture helped to enhance China's responsible great power image in that, first, its acceptance of foreign aid was a move adhering to international norms. It demonstrated that it was more responsible with its own people on top of being a 'rule taker' in the international community. Second, as a great power, it was becoming more confident. The most obvious evidence of this was its confidence in terms of military openness and transparency.

For instance, one of the core forces that participated in the rescue was the Jinan Military Region (Xinhua, 2008w), the PLA's strategic reserve, which comprised several Emergency Reaction Group Armies. The use of this strategic reserve for a non-combat mission indicated China's confidence regarding its surrounding environment. China believed that there were no immediate threats to its national security upon the decision to dispatch the strategic reserve for earthquake relief. In addition, the large scale military manoeuvres over a very long distance (over 1500km) within several days could not have been carried out very secretly. In fact, some related images were already shown on TV; other details that were not shown – for instance, the designation of each military unit, the location where the troops boarded/alighted aeroplanes/trains and the routes of projection – could easily be traced by outside strategic analysts with the help of satellite technology and

⁵³ According to the Japanese, it was to avoid reminding the Chinese people of the bombing of Chongqing between 1938 and 1943.

the like. Such information might be indicative as to how China might deploy military resources in wartime. However, China still made this manoeuvre, implying it valued its people more than military secrets.

Moreover, foreign military aircrafts were allowed to fly over Chinese airspace and land at hinterland airports. ‘You can see all kinds of foreign military cargo aircrafts at the Chengdu Shuangliu Airport. This was unthinkable in the past’, according to Major General Qian Lihua, director of the Foreign Affairs Office at the Ministry of Defence (Xinhua, 2008g). Countries sending military aircrafts to China included world powers such as the USA and Russia (which sent 9 aircrafts). They flew into the southwest of China from the east and north over a long distance. China’s acceptance of these military aircrafts, despite the fact that they were from strategic competitors and that technically these aircrafts could collect a lot of useful information on the way, was a good counter statement in response to the concerns over China’s military opacity. It was an indication that China was prepared to risk the exposure of its ‘hard power’ if its people were in needed of supplies.

This brought us to the second factor, i.e. the notion of soft power, a dimension of power into which China has been putting considerable effort in order to assure the world of its peaceful rise without changing the ‘rules of the game’. For a long time, there had been concerns in the West over China’s ultimate goals as China grew exponentially. Proponents of the ‘China threat thesis’ warned that once China accumulated enough strength, it was not only going to change the global economic balance of power, but also the structures of international governance institutions; it might even try to challenge the currently dominating liberal democratic norm by presenting a distinctive ‘Chinese alternative’ (Breslin, 2010).

However, the openness of China during the Sichuan earthquake relief clearly demonstrated its commitment to some fundamental and universally applicable norms in

that it did whatever it took to save the people, an explicit upholding of the right to life and the right to security of the person⁵⁴. It wanted to show to the world that China was one among them, and that it was not an exception trying to destabilise the system. Rather, it was a stabiliser and active supporter of certain fundamental values, the understanding of which was shared by the whole human race.

The rapid and open earthquake relief therefore assured both those from outside China and those from within. To the Chinese people, such a gesture was a recognition that previously the government had not had enough respect for lives, so the government was learning and catching up visibly in this regard. For the international community, this highly visible change made the ‘responsible great power’ rhetoric more convincing, because such rhetoric now found domestic origin and evidence. These changes improved the image of the Chinese government both domestically and internationally. They also contributed to a different dimension of Chinese soft power, as previously the discussion on soft power usually focused on China’s exporting of economic and cultural influence to other parts of the world, but here the focus was on China’s adhering to norms from the outside which had been rejected on various grounds previously. In this sense, soft power was not only about what a country exported, but what it embraced.

Despite the above two, long-term factors, there were contingent events that facilitated China’s unprecedented openness. For example, as mentioned above, the Chinese government wanted to show that it was caring about the Chinese people more than anything else by presenting itself as a more humane, more benevolent, and above all, a different government from the past. What exactly was it different from? The question found its answer in a catastrophe comparable to the Sichuan Earthquake in scale, the 1976 Tangshan Earthquake, in which radical leftists in the government manipulated the

⁵⁴ The exact wording of the Chinese government was more implicit. These rights oriented phrases were replaced by phrases such as ‘respect for lives’.

catastrophe for political advantage and handled it without openness. As such, here, Tangshan was implicitly regarded as a benchmark by the government to show that it had improved significantly in Sichuan three decades later.

An event of a similar nature that happened more recently was the Cyclone Nargis, which swept through Myanmar in May 2008. The ruling junta in Myanmar hampered international aid and the international community condemned them strongly. For a long time, China was thought to have backed the ruling regime in Myanmar despite international pressure calling for political liberalisation. Having learnt from this bad example, the Chinese leadership knew that they would be regarded by the international community as fellow dictators with Myanmar's junta generals unless they accepted international aid. Leaders in China presumably took this different sort of international pressure into account when they decided to behave differently to their 'friendly' neighbour.

The international consequences of the Tibet unrest in March 2008 also affected the Chinese leadership's decision to be more open in a crisis. In the Tibet riot, all foreign journalists were forced to leave the area, leaving no independent source available regarding the nature and extent of the crisis. The Chinese government and the Dalai Lama accused each other of being responsible for the crisis. Both accounts were highly politicised and partial, and neither could be confirmed owing to the absence of credible witnesses (Blecher, 2009). The international community was confused by exactly what happened, but as usual, mainstream opinion turned against the Chinese government owing to long-standing mistrust. Such mistrust culminated in the Beijing Olympic Torch Relay in which pro-Tibetan protests followed and sought to obstruct the Relay as the Torch travelled over several continents. Following a series of embarrassing events, the Chinese government learnt that in an international environment where mainstream public opinion was often against itself, the best counterstrategy was to be open and allow the western media access

to first-hand information and the scene in order to let them generate an independent, relatively less stereotyped discourse from the ‘epicentre’ of a crisis that might be supportive to the discourse of the Chinese government. This partly explained the decision to permit foreign journalists access to the quake area and even helping them start working on site.

The last such attributing factor was the Olympics itself. With the successful bid for the Olympics, Beijing promised adherence to international practices, including the right for foreign journalists, during the Olympics and the run up to the Olympics, to interview anyone upon consent of the interviewee (Xinhua, 2006b). This new rule certainly encouraged foreign journalists to go to Sichuan at the first opportunity. It also reminded the Chinese government, in a situation in which western opinion became less supportive – especially when western celebrities threatened an Olympic boycott – of the extra political cost of violating international practices on media reporting.

China’s relief effort during the Sichuan earthquake was a paradigm shift towards openness and respect for lives. It was a result of the Chinese government’s own initiatives, accelerated by contingent events. Its long sought prestige of a responsible great power became more convincing following the earthquake. Its soft power in terms of the willingness to embrace universal norms, or international practices at least, was consolidated. The new found openness was a win-win situation: the victims were rescued more quickly as a result of foreign assistance; the government’s move towards more openness, on the other hand, had ‘nothing to lose but international legitimacy to gain’ (Potter, 1997).

5.3.2 The Centralisation of Power

Strong leadership was born out of great crises and the Sichuan earthquake added further empirical evidence to support this proposition. Since even in democracies a widely perceived crisis would grant the incumbent leadership greater power than under normal politics, in the case of China this was even more the case because of the long-standing, unitary nature of its political system (Hui, 2009). Despite the varying levels of state retreat from different realms of Chinese society that resulted in the dismantling of the totalitarian state, the totalitarian mentality has never faded and remained strong (Jing, 2010). The Leninist structure of the Chinese Party-state meant that it was essentially a structure set up to deal with crises through all-out mobilisation. As a result, whenever there was a crisis, the totalitarian mentality would make a strong come-back and the mode of mobilisation resembled the Party's revolutionary-era-style. We should bear this intrinsic characteristic or inclination in mind when analysing power relations regarding any crisis in China.

Moreover, in the case of the Sichuan earthquake, the leadership could not afford not to centralise power and react quickly. The location of the earthquake told all: Wenchuan county was located in central north Sichuan, a hinterland and mountainous place that had been much overlooked by state development strategies for decades. It was an Ethnic Autonomous County where more than half of those living there were ethnic minorities, including 18.6 percent who were Tibetan (Xinhua, 2008r). It was an economically peripheral locality vulnerable to disasters and simply would not be able to cope with disasters on its own.

Remote places like Wenchuan were also politically peripheral in that political supervision from the top to these places had been weak and minimal. When a disaster hit such places, it thus stirred fear among the central leadership who believed that local officials would almost certainly misbehave (because of incompetence or disobedience).

This could exacerbate the vulnerability of the victims and even lead to a second wave of misery as a result of delayed disaster relief and diseases.

Therefore, it was Wenchuan's dual periphery, economic and political, that caused much worry among the Beijing leadership. Historically and around the world, peripheral regions were often the most vulnerable to disasters owing to economic backwardness and insufficient political attention paid to these regions. Disasters therefore often highlighted regional and ethnic inequality which could potentially activate nascent discontent along these lines. For instance, the Berber communities protested in the aftermath of the 2004 Moroccan earthquake against existing regional inequality (Pelling and Dill, 2009). For the Sichuan earthquake itself, media attention highlighted the problem of poor infrastructure that delayed the relief effort; the wiping out of whole towns and villages showed how weak local governance was in enforcing building codes. Unknown or unnoticed problems were likely to surface and be magnified by media attention.

What was more worrying to the state was that as these problems got worse because of the damage caused by the disaster, resistance to the state may snowball. This resistance may become organised and even give rise to a political force in opposition to the central state, owing to the availability of a temporary political vacuum. This opposition may provide an alternative source of relief effort that could be in direct competition with the central state in winning the hearts and minds of the people. For instance, following the Marmara earthquake in Turkey, the immediate relief effort was provided by NGOs (many of which were pro-Islamic) rather than the state, owing to weak state capacity. NGOs were praised for their quick response through which they gained much legitimacy. The state stepped in soon after and suppressed NGO activities with a heavy hand for fear that these Islamic organisations may have turned the disaster to their political advantage (Washington Post, 1999; Pelling and Dill, 2009). That even a regime with significant democratic

elements like Turkey promptly repressed such a challenge to the state, an authoritarian regime like China would no doubt deem such organised activity to be a serious political threat. There was a political imperative to react quickly so as to fill any potential vacuum of state power.

But fear of a political vacuum could only partly explain the Chinese leadership's motivation for a quick response. On the other hand, there was much potential for the state to turn the crisis to its advantage as the regime could garner greater legitimacy if a crisis and its associated tensions were recognised and handled well (USAID, 2002). The potential of a totalitarian mentality and the rigorously organised Party-state structure often fitted this purpose well. The benefit of both in the process of centralising power was apparent. In addition, with China's strong state capacity in general (Goodman, 2004), and its extractive capacity in times of crisis in particular, the effectiveness of the power centralisation was ensured.

I. The Centralisation of Decision Making

The centralisation of power was first manifested in the immediate tightening up of the Party-state apparatus. Following the quake, something familiar re-emerged: the Party unified awareness while the central government did whatever it took to extract and then redistribute resources. For instance, the PSC convened two meetings within just three days to rally the Party. On the part of the government, Premier Wen took a dozen government ministers with him when he rushed to the epicentre. He virtually 'moved most of the State Council apparatus' to Sichuan (Lianhe Zaobao, 2008). The level of centralisation was both swift and unprecedented in scale.

This unprecedented efficiency of centralisation could only be achieved under a strong leadership with firm determination⁵⁵. Therefore, the political background conducive to strong leadership should be noted. In the last six months prior to the earthquake, the 17th PC and the 11th NPC met respectively. A series of personnel manoeuvres at both meetings occurred which favoured the Hu-Wen leadership compared with the 16th PC and the 10th NPC convened five years before, when the partly ‘unsettled transition’ of leadership looked rather ambiguous (Fewsmith, 2003b). This laid the foundations for a stronger Hu-Wen leadership, but did not necessitate its extraordinary centralisation of power, which could not be justified or legitimised unless there was a major crisis. Coincidentally, the earthquake gave momentum to the Hu-Wen leadership’s desire to reassert its authority through centralising control. It accelerated and concentrated the political status quo pre-earthquake. Facilitated by such a favourable setting, Hu and Wen could take the helm swiftly and got their way.

With Hu Jintao confirmed as the CCP’s paramount leader, his crisis leadership was resolute. Despite mobilising the Party apparatus – as was the case in SARS – what was more remarkable was that Hu as the Chairman of the Central Military Commission gained firm command over the military in this wave of power centralisation. This was significant because in reality it was largely powerful, individual leaders who could exert control over the military rather than (in principle) the Party as the organisation to command the gun (Zheng and Lye, 2004).

While centralising control in the Party and the military was relatively straightforward because they operated largely in the top-down mode, Wen Jiabao’s task to centralise power on the part of the central government was potentially more problematic

⁵⁵ Remember what happened at the peak of SARS when only Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao and Vice Premier Wu Yi took visible actions against SARS, even the then Health Minister Zhang Wenkang did not accompany them when they were visiting the affected areas, whereas all other members of the PSC remained ambiguously silent. It was only after SARS was labelled as a major crisis against which a ‘people’s war’ was waged that the CCP leadership took unified and all-out actions.

and to this we should pay more attention analytically. Following the 11th NPC, many elected ministers in Wen's cabinet were new faces. In addition, the problem of fragmented authoritarianism deepened further as several former ministries dealing with similar policy areas were merged to form 'super ministries' whose efficacy remained to be seen. By the time of the earthquake, some of these super ministries had not completed the restructuring in roles and jurisdictions (Sina.com, 2008c)⁵⁶. This could lead to catastrophic consequences in the relief effort if things were messed up owing to these ministries' incomplete transition (which was highly likely under 'normal politics', or at least it would take these ministries a considerable amount of time to familiarise themselves with the new roles). Wen was acutely aware of this, and he thus brought the ministers under one roof in order to improve coordination and collaboration. These ministers, along with other government officials, led or joined eight working groups which centralised the command in eight designated areas⁵⁷.

II. Top-down Accountability

One may note that the ministers who went with Wen to Sichuan almost exactly mimicked local government functionalities during disaster relief. Referring to the above discussion on crisis and the 'central-field' gap between the central state and local governments (Boin and Otten, 1996), the centralisation of power in the form of on-site decision making and supervision by senior leaders narrowed down the distance between the central and local governments in terms of communication and information processing. With the presence of many ministerial-level leaders in the quake zone, the layers of principal-agent relations

⁵⁶ For example, the newly established Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) had not been functioning with new responsibilities until late June 2008.

⁵⁷ These were the groups for disaster relief, forecast and monitor, medical and sanitation, livelihood arrangement, infrastructure, production recovery, public order and propaganda.

involved in the policy process were reduced from five to two – in many cases bureaucracies at the provincial, prefectural and county levels were bypassed. This extraordinary measure mitigated the potential for local bureaucrats to manipulate information – senior leaders ‘stand over the shoulder of every local official’ to supervise closely and ensure compliance and competence (Breslin, 2008a:26).

This top-down measure of accountability proved to be even more necessary when huge amounts of relief supplies flooded into the affected area and created a huge temptation for corruption. This monitoring, along with bottom-up pressure from the people, such as exposure on the Internet of possible appropriation of relief materials, made such cases surface quickly as they occurred (for example, the appropriation of tents mentioned above). The on-site senior leadership’s awareness of what was happening on the ground allowed these wrongdoings to be punished promptly⁵⁸.

III. Organisational Shake-up

Moreover, the Party explicitly utilised this crisis-induced opportunity to shake up the entire system. In other words, it used the Sichuan earthquake as a touchstone to test the loyalty, competence and diligence of Party members and thus systematically remove those deemed unqualified. Only days after the quake, the CCP’s Central Organisational Department launched a campaign to tighten Party discipline, asking subordinating Party organisational departments to evaluate cadres according to their performance in the earthquake relief (Xinhua, 2008v). 28 cadres were punished or removed in the first three weeks for

⁵⁸ Under ‘normal politics’, the entire accountability procedure was prolonged. It might take months or even years from the point of starting investigation to the point where those responsible finally received punishment. Also, within the process, local distortion of information was prevalent. With the presence of senior leaders in a major crisis, wrongdoings were more likely to be spotted and therefore receive prompt and severe punishment. But under this critical circumstance local bureaucrats were at the risk of being punished more severely than they deserve because such a circumstance was likely to be characterised by ‘rule by man’ rather than ‘rule by law’. The central leadership needed targets for high profile crackdowns in order to show their commitment to the people as well as disciplining the rest of the bureaucracy.

nonfeasance, and later 186 more were punished for offences in allocating relief supplies or funds, in accordance with a newly promulgated Party decree requiring such cases to be punished 'quickly and seriously'. On the other hand, 69 cadres that performed well were promoted (including 19 promoted more than one rank). As in the case of SARS, Party branches also made a significant number of new recruits at the site of disaster relief (Legal Daily, 2008; Sichuan Daily, 2008; Xinhua, 2008t).

As a result, the earthquake relief exerted a considerable impact on the existing power relations within the political system. The centralisation of power opened a window of opportunities for the central Party-state to redraw the boundary of central-local relations by extending the reach of the centre, and thus penetrate inertial local governments. And, as usual, personnel mobility played a key role in serving this purpose. Heavy-handed measures ensured compliance while ad hoc promotions enlisted loyalty to the Party and to the central leadership who initiated these measures. In other words, the centralisation of power for crisis management and the consolidation of the Hu-Wen leadership's authority took place concurrently.

IV. Fiscal Centralisation and Redistribution

It should also be noted that the centralisation of power did not fade as the disaster relief finished. During the period of reconstruction, this effect continued and extended well beyond Sichuan. In terms of resources, the state council used the redistribution mechanism. It designated each wealthy province to aid one county in the quake zone in the form of delivering construction projects (Gov.cn, 2008a). In terms of personnel management, the Central Organisational Department despatched many cadres to Sichuan to fill the vacancies in Party branches at various levels (Xinhua, 2008u).

After the central government had done this, people and especially the victims might have had the impression that the central government was much more responsive than the local government. This perception enhanced the popular conviction that the central state was more accountable and benevolent, compared with the local state's corrupt and self-enriching image. Even under normal circumstances, such perceived difference was widely held among the average citizen in China and was supported by a number of studies which suggested that the central state enjoyed much greater perceived legitimacy than the local state⁵⁹ (Gilley, 2008; Li, 2006; Saich, 2005). As such, the effective disaster relief in the Sichuan earthquake directed by the central government gave additional credence to its legitimacy. This was precisely the effect that the central leadership wanted to achieve through managing a crisis, and it led us to the interpretation of the last, but most important, political utility of the Sichuan earthquake.

5.3.3 Reconnecting with the People

As previously argued, the CCP, like many other parties in other polities, often did not treat a major crisis as a purely negative event per se. Rather, it consistently sought to utilise the opportunity that came along with the crisis. And on numerous occasions, the CCP took advantage of the miserable situation in the aftermath of a major crisis or natural disaster to enhance its perceived role as the people's saviour, an image that the CCP has been trying to maintain since its very foundation in the early 1920s. In other words, the CCP has been using crisis situations to reiterate the message that the Party was flying to save the people

⁵⁹ And the central government sought to reinforce this perception through deliberate attempts to localise local problems. One measure was to encourage people appealing directly to local governments while discouraging them from travelling a long way to Beijing for appeals. As a supplementary measure, local government offices (especially those at the county level) were periodically asked to open their doors and welcome petitioners. These measures were ways of mobilising the underprivileged people to exert checks and balances (to some extent) on local authorities.

whenever they were in trouble. One may argue that the CCP requires crises to stay relevant (Miller and Scobell, 2005).

At the same time, the paternalistic Chinese political culture implied that the social contract between those who ruled and those were ruled comprised an essential component; that was, the people were *expecting* to be looked after by the state, especially in the event of adversity. Whilst some degree of dependency on the government in adversity was also common in liberal democracies, what was unique about the Chinese case was that the Chinese people regarded the army as having a legitimate role to play in adverse situations and thus aspired to the PLA's presence in natural disasters in particular. The PLA was viewed as the mainstay in government crisis management that gave the people assurance. Under such circumstances, the PLA was not just the army of the state but the army of the people. After many occasions of extensive PLA involvement in natural disaster rescues since the founding of the PRC, the PLA's self-promoted image as the saviour of the people and the popular perception of such an image were mutually reinforcing.

In this context, crises like the Sichuan earthquake often gave regime legitimacy a short-term but robust boost because China's strong extractive state capacity, and the PLA's abundant manpower, would almost guarantee the government to do well on those occasions that required large scale mobilisation. Having had the ideal situation for decisive intervention and also the strong capability of doing so, there was nothing as good as a natural disaster for the Party to reconnect and win the hearts and minds of the people. Some Chinese scholars even argued that *any* natural disasters were good for regime legitimacy⁶⁰.

⁶⁰ Interview with a professor in political science, March 2010, Beijing.

In previous natural disasters in the PRC's history, the practice of trying actively to reassert the Party's relevance with the people has been prevalent⁶¹. In this respect, the handling of the Sichuan earthquake was similar to handling the floods that affect China almost every summer. The Sichuan earthquake was not even very different from the Tangshan earthquake in terms of the *strategy* used. What made the Sichuan earthquake stand out, however, were the different and sophisticated *tactics* serving this *strategy*.

I. From Paternalism to Humanism

The most apparent difference could be observed from the leadership's gesture. In previous disasters, the Chinese leaders' attempts at showing a connection with the people tended to appear impersonal. Although the 'warmth of the Party and the government' was always stressed, the more personal faces and characters of individual leaders were not conveyed. The convention of keeping a low profile was adhered to strictly so as not to emphasise the personality of any individual leader in an era when collective leadership was the unchallengeable norm⁶². However, the disadvantage of this was that it distanced leaders from the people and engendered alienation. As a result, although the leadership tried to show their connections with the people, the result was unsatisfactory owing to poor interaction between the leaders and the people on a 'personal' level.

This was a common problem before the Sichuan earthquake. For example, during the floods in the summer of 1998, Jiang Zemin personally visited the flood-affected areas of Hubei and Jiangxi provinces. But upon comparing video footage of his activities there with that of the Hu-Wen leadership during the Sichuan earthquake, a palpable difference

⁶¹ In the CCP jargon, such re-engagement is called 'consistently maintain the "flesh and blood" ties between the Party and the people'.

⁶² And by implication, individual leaders were unwilling to behave too personally when addressing a domestic audience, but it was interesting to note that leaders behaved much more personally and flexibly during their visits to foreign countries where highlighting personality was not an issue.

appeared. When addressing the crowds, the language Jiang used was filled with outmoded political slogans and he was surrounded by circles of officials while he was talking. His talk to the masses did not differ much from that to his subordinates, in that the style of his talking was very inflammatory but paternalistic, characterised by indoctrination and orders as opposed to sympathy and care (but it was consistent with the neoconservative leadership style in the Jiang era which stressed authority) (Fewsmith, 2008). From the people's point of view, this approach easily distanced 'them' from 'us' because, first of all, the leaders did not speak the masses' language, let alone find resonance with the people. It could be a good opportunity for improving relations between the Party and the masses, but it was not seized well.

Equally important, for any crisis, it was the people that were most vulnerable to the hazard. However, this important point seemed to be neglected by former leaders in that they often stressed the political significance of resolving crises. In other words, they constantly tended to treat crises as political struggles. Even worse, such inclinations were sometimes externalised. For example, Jiang, during the same visit, stressed that the top priorities for the battle against floods were: ensuring the safety of dams, ensuring the safety of big cities such as Wuhan and the Jiangnan Plain, and ensuring the safety of people's lives and property. His order of priority might be unintentional, but he did put the people last.

As soon as the Hu-Wen leadership took power, they attempted to make a departure from this and constructed their image differently, as 'men of the people'. From the very beginning of their term, Hu-Wen put forward a new discourse of 'putting people first' which was embedded in the 'three people thesis'. Borrowed from Abraham Lincoln's dictum 'government of the people, by the people, for the people', Hu proposed a

‘development for the people, by the people and of the people’ (Ngok, 2009)⁶³. Moreover, in crisis situations, Hu-Wen’s different approach to the people distinguished them from their predecessors in particular. Hu-Wen often stressed their deep concern with the wellbeing of the people when a disaster occurred. They wanted to convince the people that they were the first leadership that viewed crises from a humanitarian perspective, i.e. viewed them as tragedies and had the utmost concern for the wellbeing of the people over other priorities.

Their gestures (including body language) therefore became more in touch with ordinary people – as opposed to the previous top-down approach – emphasised more about benevolence rather than simply boosting morale. During the peak of SARS, Hu Jintao visited Guangdong’s Disease Control Centre without wearing a mask. During the winter storm in January 2008, Wen Jiabao visited railway stations filled with tens of thousands of stranded passengers and offered his personal apology for the paralysed transport system and promised to resolve the problem so everyone could get home before the Chinese New Year’s Eve. These gestures were ‘rare moves’ for Chinese politicians at their rank (CNN, 2008), but they were helpful in shaping people’s realisations that leaders could do little more in these difficult situations (Blecher, 2009), and thus resembled, to a limited extent, a safety valve that absorbed some pressure affecting the government.

Certainly, it was over simplistic to argue that the Hu-Wen leadership cared about the people much more than their predecessors did. Rather, it was more of a Party-initiated public relations drive aimed at garnering leadership popularity, as well as forging a new, engaging relationship with the people. Brady (2008:3) argues that, thanks to increasing cultural exchange, the Chinese regime has been learning, adapting and exercising a ‘methodology of political public relations, mass communications, political

⁶³ This is the update to an earlier version: ‘use power for the people, show concern for the people and seek benefit for the people’.

communications, and other modern methods of mass persuasion commonly utilised in western democratic societies'. The existence of such practices was no secret within China. For example, it was widely rumoured that each of the nine PSC members had his own public relations consulting team comprised of highly experienced media professionals who managed all the details of the leader's publicised appearances, e.g. to whom to speak during inspections, what clothes to wear on which occasion or the best angles from which to film televised video. Notably, it was commonly felt that Wen Jiabao's team did a good job in constructing him as an open minded and engaging leader, and that distinguished him from other top leaders in terms of personal image (RFI, 2011)⁶⁴. Being aware of the importance of the Internet in shaping public opinion and its decentralised features, Hu and Wen also attended a number of online Q&A sessions with netizens to show their accessibility. They wanted to change the deep-seated stereotype about the overly serious and rigid perception of Chinese leaders and they wanted especially to appeal to the youth, who later set up an unofficial publicity website to promote Hu-Wen's image (similar to Facebook's fan pages) which was endorsed by the authorities⁶⁵.

All these political marketing efforts peaked and presumably reaped praise, during the Sichuan earthquake. Wen Jiabao rushed to the epicentre at the very earliest opportunity. In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, people's attention tended to focus on the casualty and physical damage and they psychologically required a stabilisation force of some kind to pacify their sadness. Wen's timely arrival thus greatly boosted national confidence⁶⁶. People saw on live broadcast the Premier stressing at every moment the utmost importance of saving lives. His tireless work and humane gestures greatly repaired

⁶⁴ While this approach presumably improved his personal image, some people, ironically, nicknamed him 'China's *ying di*' (literally, China's master movie star) for his emotional but seldom materialised promises.

⁶⁵ The People's Net even issued electronically 'Certificate of Hu-Wen's Fans', see <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/8198/132796/>

⁶⁶ As an indication of how important psychologically Wen's prompt response was, it was interesting to note that when people were referring to impressive crisis management in this earthquake by the Chinese government, the most cited evidence was Wen's timely arrival, not Hu Jintao's visit to the quake zone three days after.

the battered image of the government. People who saw him personally felt ‘moved ... He is so worried. You can see it in his eyes’ (Newsweek, 2008). During his three days in the epicentre, he behaved in a way much like a western politician in democratic societies. Despite this difference he made at the symbolic and emotional levels, Wen acted in the way that the Chinese people expected from a benevolent leader in the event of a natural disaster.

More precisely, China’s paternalistic political culture required leaders to perform the roles of both parents (to children) in times of crisis, in which the father mainly provided order and discipline and the mother provided care and sympathy. In addition, the timely arrival of a visible, benign and ‘good’ official was regarded as important as the existence of an abstract and robust crisis management regime was. Wen certainly performed his expected role well. Through hard work and touching gestures, he reminded the people of two ‘good leaders’ of the past. One of them was Zhou Enlai, the first Premier of the PRC, who had a high reputation for his diligence at work, for his care to the people and for being someone who was known as ‘The People’s Premier’. Zhou was praised for arriving promptly after the 1966 Xingtai earthquake amid aftershocks. The other ‘good leader’ was Zhu Rongji, Wen’s predecessor, who was praised for being tough to incompetent local officials. In the 1998 Yangtze River Flood, the supposedly very strong dam in Jiujiang collapsed owing to shoddy construction and it provoked Zhu’s fury; he then famously created the phrase ‘Tofu project’ which has been widely used to refer to constructions which cut corners.

Wen showed his benevolence in two ways: being benevolent to the people and being tough on subordinates as another way of showing concern to the people. For instance, in front of the ruin of a collapsed school where the electricity supply was completely down and his way ahead could only be lit by torches, he yelled into the crevice where school

children were trapped, 'I'm grandpa Wen. You children will certainly be able to tough this out and be rescued' (Reuters, 2008a). On another occasion, troops deployed for rescue moved slowly owing to bridge damage and Wen became furious and ordered them to use whatever possible means to advance. Later he told the troops boarding a plane for the epicentre: 'I have only one sentence to say, the people raised you up, and you should decide what to do in return!' (China Daily, 2008b). Parallels were drawn between Wen and Zhou and Zhu, but what Wen did and said certainly had a more humane and populist lineage.

Thanks to the media surge, everything that the top leaders did was broadcasted live, nationwide. People could feel that the leaders were with them. As a result, they were regarded as more approachable leaders, cultivating a feeling that they were among the people, in contrast to previous generations of leaders who appeared to be above the people. From this perspective, the Sichuan earthquake certainly was a departure from the top-down approach prevalent before Hu-Wen. That said, it was more than traditional paternalism. The Party, through its top leadership's gestures, adopted a much more humane approach to reconnecting with the people. Throughout the earthquake relief, especially during its immediate aftermath, it was strongly felt that the state's handling of the disaster was apolitical or depoliticised (compared to previous, similar crises). The Chinese leadership treated the earthquake as purely a natural disaster and nothing else; it showed an unusual level of respect (by its own standard) for lives, as well as to the dead; and it conveyed unprecedented levels of emotional support to the victims. Although later developments showed that the practice of politicising a natural disaster was not completely abandoned, it was fair to say that the state at least detached the humanitarian aspect of the crisis from the political utility of the crisis thereafter.

II. State Ritual and A New Type of Nationalism?

There was an enlightenment mentality emerged from the humanism discussed above. The evidence was prevalent, from the state media's emphasis on respect for an individual's life, to the reverence for nature, and the Premier's much needed encouragement which repeatedly stressed confidence, courage and strength. Also, in Wen's words, he avoided outmoded rhetoric such as self-reliance and rebuilding the home; instead, he talked about livelihood, about the future and about being grateful to those offered help. His apolitical talk was not only rare, but conformed to liberal ideas about the development of human individuals, the community and social solidarity.

In addition, the relatively open media policy significantly changed the way that the Chinese public perceived a catastrophe. The live coverage of the event by all forms of modern media conveyed a timely sense of 'distant suffering', i.e. a distant but powerful impact felt by the spectator who without being there – an impact which shocked the emotional state of the spectator (Xu, 2009).

Some observers were right in claiming that, as with many natural disasters, the CCP turned the Sichuan earthquake into a nationalist movement (Pelling and Dill, 2009). Nonetheless, nationalist sentiments that emerged at this time were clearly tinted with liberal values, such as individual rights (respect for life), equality (common suffering) and national solidarity on the basis of strong self-awareness among individual citizens. This differed from the xenophobic nationalism as found in the Tangshan earthquake when the Party promoted the theme of self-reliance and thus refused all foreign aid. It also differed from the officially promoted pragmatic nationalism which required citizens to identify with

the Party-state. At the very least, it was a new type of nationalism in that it was not illiberal or xenophobic nationalism⁶⁷.

This nationalism with liberal values culminated in the state organised commemorative ritual for people that died in the catastrophe. On 19 May 2008, seven days after the deadly Sichuan Earthquake, the whole nation of China was in its deepest mourning for the tens of thousands of victims who lost their lives in the earthquake. Chinese people stood in silence for three minutes at 2:28 pm, the moment when the quake struck Sichuan exactly one week previously, amid the ringing air sirens of automobiles, trains and ships. These were part of the rituals organised by the State Council, which earlier declared a three-day national mourning period from 19 to 21 May (Gov.cn, 2008b). Public recreational activities were also suspended and all newspapers and websites were presented in black and white only. Most symbolically, the national flag of the PRC for the first time flew at half-mast for the ordinary people. In the past the national flag was only lowered for the loss of national leaders and national heroes⁶⁸. After the lowering of the national flag at Tiananmen Square on the morning of 19 May, the crowd hailed ‘Zhongguo jiaoyou’ (China, be stronger) and ‘Sichuan jiaoyou’ (Sichuan, be stronger) (CCTV, 2008).

The above political ritual had significance in its own right in that from the nationalism with liberal values perspective, intellectuals (and the public to a lesser extent) participated in the making of state policy with regard to organising this ritual. The state responded appropriately to the public mood. Shortly after the earthquake, a prominent public intellectual, Professor Hu Xingdou, wrote a blog article that resonated with public sympathy and was supported by many. He suggested that holding a period of national mourning ‘seemingly has no substantive significance, but it essentially reflects who the

⁶⁷ The author preferred not to use the term liberal nationalism because this term implied that the source of legitimacy was from active and routine civic participation, in which regard the Chinese civil society did not qualify.

⁶⁸ The most recent such occasions were in 1997 when Deng Xiaoping died; and in 1999 when the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade was bombed by the NATO, killing 3 Chinese journalists.

genuine masters of the state are, and thus is consistent with the ancient Chinese notion of “nation is people based” ... lowering the national flag for the ordinary people reflects the central role of the people in the state and that will enhance national cohesion and pride’ (Hu, 2008). The state accepted the suggestion⁶⁹. Being responsive to public opinion on non-controversial issues made the state look more compassionate. Popular inputs also lent state policy greater legitimacy and, as a result, holding a period of national mourning after a major disaster has been institutionalised since then.

Xu (2009) argued that in this commemorative ritual the state ‘unusually downplayed itself to honour ordinary victims’. In the past, the state more often dictated and educated than interacted with the people, but this time it turned itself into a corporeal human which was, to some extent, on an equal footing with the people. The state not only showed respect to those who died but, more importantly, made the people alive feel that they were living in this country with dignity. It therefore contributed to the unprecedented solidarity among the Chinese.

Nevertheless, unusual progressive practices should not overshadow the more usual political calculations. At a deeper level, such a commemorative ritual stabilised the authoritarian regime through turning an otherwise divisive event⁷⁰ into a vehicle that gathered sympathy and emotional energy. Since commemorative rituals could enhance emotional energy even across a diverging value spectrum (Xu, 2009), the national mourning provided the people with a focal point despite their differences. It effectively confined the range of issues that could be potentially in competition with those on the

⁶⁹ Actually the National Flag Law of the PRC stipulates that ‘the national flag may fly at half-mast in the case of a calamity or severe natural disaster which caused extremely heavy casualties.’ Although the Law came into effect in 1990, this clause regarding lowering the flag for ordinary citizens had not been implemented until the Sichuan earthquake, despite the fact that in the previous two decades there were a number of very severe natural disasters.

⁷⁰ It was potentially divisive because the catastrophe highlighted the problem of inequality and corruption, which triggered a series of smaller crises as the situation developed.

official agenda. In other words, concerns over more controversial issues relating to local weak governance were ‘submerged’ by the tide of huge sympathy, at least in the short term.

5.4 The Earthquake and State-society Relations

This section has so far dealt with the more symbolic and emotional side of disaster politics in the wake of the Sichuan earthquake. However, the institutional side of the event marked the most important difference between the Sichuan earthquake and disasters in the past; that was, popular participation and the fledgling civil society. Whilst civic effervescence was the most substantive change in political terms, it could not be fully understood without reference to media openness and the rise of the Internet, especially that of social media.

5.4.1 Civic Effervescence

As discussed above, media transparency cultivated a sense of distant suffering and nationalism with liberal values. It was precisely these mentalities that compelled many more people in the rest of the nation to contribute to disaster relief. In this respect, the media effectively mobilised ordinary people to participate in disaster relief. This again differed from previous disasters where media reporting lagged behind the development of the situation, and people read such messages in the ‘past tense’ and thus did not have as strong an ‘impulsion’ to join with regard to an ongoing event.

The Internet – especially discussion boards, blogs and other facilities with interactive functions – played an essential role in communicating distant suffering. It was interesting to note that a lot of the ‘raw materials’ of media reporting, including many used by the state media, were from the grassroots participants who produced them on-site. In

other words, the content of media reporting was more ‘authentic’ than ‘official’, which lent these media reports substantial credibility. In this regard, grassroots contributions to state media actually helped to validate state propaganda. With state media unusually echoing the voice on the ground, more people were thus encouraged to participate in the relief effort.

While the magnitude of this civic effervescence was dramatic, it was not surprising given nearly two decades of arduous but persistent civic participation, of which the huge civic upspring following the Sichuan earthquake was its natural outcome (Yang, 2008). The burgeoning ‘civil sphere’ emerged in as early as the 1980s as a result of the rolling back of the Chinese state. Even major international NGOs started operations in China after the late 1980s. The Tiananmen crackdown dampened this development, but not for long, as the tragic outcome of the incident urged Chinese intellectuals to reflect on viable routes towards China’s democratic future. Some of them believed that the hope of liberalising China lay firmly with a developed civil society, rather than with a heroic uprising. Since then, the notion of civil society has been increasingly popular in the Chinese academia, and some intellectuals even initiated their own grassroots NGOs⁷¹. These NGOs have become more capable in terms of resource mobilisation and capacity building during their operations since they were established. As a result, Chinese NGOs in the Sichuan earthquake were not acting in any new forms in terms of mobilisation and assistance. They have been practising these skills for years (Yang, 2008). The only difference was that the earthquake repositioned many NGOs from their habitual marginal status to the centre stage of socio-political life in China.

Moreover, these organisations utilised the after-quake social opening to form a coherent civil ‘society’, as opposed to operating on their own, and thus made civic

⁷¹ By then, the term *shimin shehui* was widely used by the Chinese academia instead of *gongmin shehui*. The latter was more political rights based than the former despite the fact that they were both translated from the English term ‘civil society’. Similarly, NGOs were initially referred to as *minjian zuzhi* instead of *feizhengfu zuzhi*, with the latter having a connotation of political independence.

effervescence after the quake qualitatively different from their previous activities. In the past, the so called civil society, if it existed, was at best fragmented, because civic organisations working on similar issues had not worked with each other so closely owing to the need to compete for resources, such as funding or public awareness (Zhu, 2009a).

The immense challenge posed by the earthquake and the flood of relief supplies and volunteers into the quake zone created an urgent need for organisations to cooperate. As many as 19 national and regional NGO associations for disaster relief, including two major associations based in the quake zone (The Sichuan NGO Disaster Relief Joint Office and The 5.12 Non-governmental Relief Service Centre) were formed to coordinate the activities of the NGOs (Zhu, 2009b). In addition, these newly established associations collaborated with local government offices and the corporate sector for an all-out concerted relief effort. For instance, the Service Centre worked with the government in securing access for its NGO members, and also acted as an umbrella command structure that supervised the NGO activities and resolved practical difficulties such as creating a volunteer database, a training programme and an insurance plan (Teets, 2009). Another umbrella association, The Chinese Non-governmental Earthquake Relief Joint Action, attracted 122 NGOs and extensively communicated to the public the services that its members could offer and what specific relief materials or equipment they needed from the corporate sector in order to provide such services (Narada Foundation, 2008). Such initiatives greatly increased the efficiency of relief effort. In sum, the NGOs' cooperative participation and activism reflected three decades of incremental change in the relationship between the state, market and civil society. Before the earthquake, interactions between the three had not always been smooth; in fact, each had accumulated significant tension with the other two and this often resulted in zero-sum situations. The earthquake, however,

revealed the potential of benign interactions between them which could deliver positive-sum societal outcomes.

5.4.2 Social Cohesion and Building Trust towards Civil Society

Similarly, the unprecedented recognition of and support for civil society by the masses was also a natural outcome of people's rising public awareness. The depoliticisation of everyday life since the reform era was not only accompanied by commercialism and consumerism, but an increasing disinterest in public affairs and politics (Liu, 2011). However, as the reform deepened with mounting tensions that affected almost every aspect of daily life, no one could stay aloof from getting involved in debates about livelihood issues. The need for interest articulation has put considerable pressure on the political system which lacked the exact channels through which grievances could be expressed.

The advent of the Internet in the late 1990s, and its widespread usage afterwards, has strongly influenced state-society relations against this backdrop of the pluralisation of interests. In democratic societies where there already existed established channels for interest articulation and points of access to the policy process, the Internet only played a complementary role in relaying public opinion. In contrast, the Internet in China has been playing a more indispensable role in communicating societal needs and has become the most important means of affecting policy outcomes from below. As such, the people's neglected interest in public affairs has been fuelled by the Internet. In particular, the Internet greatly facilitated people's expression of interest in public affairs, and demonstrated its potential for mobilisation in times of crisis. Since the 1999 US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, popular opinions online (and even collective actions conducted offline, for example, the 2005 anti-Japanese protest), whether rational or

otherwise, have become an influential factor which Chinese policy makers could not ignore.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, a robust response from the civil society met with a population with increasing civic awareness, and, along with the Internet, catalysed more trust between ordinary people and the civil society through bridging the gap in mutual understanding. Consequently, many donation initiatives were launched online with the participation of NGOs and supported by the mass public. For instance, a number of China's most well-known commercial web portals partnered with the One Foundation run by Jet Li, and raised a donation of ¥24 million within three days, mostly from individual netizens. This case was noticeable because it linked NGOs and websites on the one hand, and users of social media on the other (Roney, 2011). It was a new form of mobilisation coming out of an existing social setting.

These new initiatives greatly facilitated ordinary citizens' understanding of how public affairs could be managed alternatively, i.e. by changing the popular, deep-seated belief that the government should be responsible for everything and showed instead that organised citizens possessed the capacity for self-governing on public affairs which were previously shouldered by the state.

Although Chinese people did not always trust the government, traditionally, when choosing between initiatives organised by the government and those organised by civic organisations, many people would still go for the former. Societal formations were widely perceived as lacking credibility, being undisciplined and being fiscally unreliable. Their politically independent status did not give them extra credentials, but sometimes became the source of discrimination because the political climate of a strong centralised state (and some people's respect towards it) made the identity of such organisations complicated (they claimed to do something that overlapped with government responsibility, but were

not part of the government). This ambiguity subjected these organisations to wide public suspicion (Cooper, 2006).

This predicament could be partly explained by the fact that the Chinese state and the market have risen respectively in the first and subsequent three decades since the founding of the PRC, whereas civil society had remained weak. As a result, the people were not convinced that civil society as a societal force in its own right could bring about concrete change. Another reason was that the reform created a deeper cleavage within society in that different segments of society were preoccupied with protecting their self-interests that were so different and incompatible. Chinese society as a whole did not share a common pursuit or values, which further diminished the credibility of what it stood for or what it could do.

Evidence in the past revealed that huge catastrophes could catalyse social cohesiveness, even in divisive societies. And China in the context of the Sichuan earthquake was moving exactly in this direction. Chinese people found something in common among all social strata: humanism, altruism and an awareness of civil rights and obligations (Zhu, 2009a) – all of which were prerequisites for a functioning democracy. Moreover, people witnessed or even participated in social initiatives that did achieve concrete outcomes, cultivating an unambiguous consciousness that well organised citizens had the potential to bring about progress, i.e. the building of trust towards (civil) society. Indeed, many of the civic activities were ad hoc and poorly implemented. Nevertheless, these activities swept through all quarters of Chinese society, significantly increased the potential volunteer and donor base of charitable initiatives (Han and Ji, 2009), and improved the sustainability of such initiatives for the future. The Sichuan earthquake was thus essentially an enlightenment and educational experience for the people. Precisely

because of this, Chinese scholars labelled 2008 as China's 'civil society epic year' (China Daily, 2009b).

It was also interesting to note that this unprecedented civic activism had much to do with the specific political context surrounding 2008, when China adapted extensively in response to holding the Beijing Olympics. Volunteering, among other things, had become popular well before the Olympics and that certainly contributed to civic participation following the earthquake (it at least provided thousands of trained volunteers). On the part of the government, after its criticised response to the snowstorm that swept through central China in early 2008, in which civil society was virtually absent, it should have realised that even a strong centralised state needed complementing societal forces for better crisis management, at least in increasing the effectiveness and extending the reach of government resources (Teets, 2009).

5.4.3 State Responses to Civil Society Participation

Although the civic effervescence crossed the state's red line of political dominance temporarily, it should be remembered that this could not be achieved without the implicit consent of the government. Indeed, the government did change its conventional approach towards civil society and acted by not acting, refraining from interfering with civic groups for several weeks. However, the fact that this crisis-induced social and political opening did not last long also reflected the Party's contradictory mentality towards civil society. This ambivalence reflected the deep disagreement within the Party regarding the impact of civil society on Party rule as we discussed in Chapter 3.

Furthering this discussion in relation to positive-sum versus zero-sum views on civil society, the unsettled debate within the Party led to an ambiguous fault line for civic

organisations. This ambiguity on the one hand impeded NGOs' further development because of their complicated identity, but on the other hand, without a clear-cut red line, these organisations still had considerable institutional space and plenty of practical space to take on new initiatives.

Yu Keping (2006) argued that the government has been supportive to civil society at a macro level but also imposed constraints on the micro level environment in which individual organisations found themselves. Kang Xiaoguang suggested that the government's actual approach to civil society was a combination of 'both use and control': supporting those organisations that 'help' the government in managing the complex society while monitoring closely those trouble-makers with political agendas (Mingpao, 2008). It again reflected the CCP's long-standing governing strategy of divide and rule. The Sichuan earthquake was a good case demonstrating the government's considerable tactics in balancing empowerment and control. We will discuss its empowerment and control strategies on civil society respectively.

I. Empowerment

There was ample evidence to support the government's willingness to encourage participation in the relief of such an unprecedented catastrophe. According to statistics, more than 13 million volunteers participated in the relief effort and fundraising nationwide, with more than 3 million volunteers labouring in the disaster zone (State Council, 2009). This high figure could be attributed to the government's open policy towards civil society activities. It was particularly compelling given that, by then, most Chinese people outside universities were still unfamiliar with the role volunteers played in society. Another figure in the same publication showed that the year 2008 saw a 31.8 percent jump in the number

of volunteers registered with the three largest Government Organised Non-Governmental Organisations (GONGO), suggesting that the government played a supportive role in encouraging popular participation in disaster relief.

For practical work and project management in the disaster zone, the government also played a facilitating role, allowing civic organisations to play a bigger role despite the fact that much of their participation took place without formal institutions (Teets, 2009). As mentioned before, civic organisations partnered with local governments in coordinating the relief effort, and local governments delegated some responsibility for managing the huge inflow of resources and volunteers to these organisations. In addition, high capacity civic organisations were invited to get involved in works that could improve transparency. For instance, a pilot scheme on mutual supervision between local governments, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA) and group representatives was initiated by the government (Teets, 2009).

The government learnt about these groups' utility through partnering with them. It therefore took steps to revise policies to incorporate and institutionalise their participation. On the anniversary of the Sichuan earthquake, China published its first white paper on disaster prevention in which a separate section was written on encouraging and promoting popular participation. It stated

Social mobilisation mechanisms are to be improved to give full play to the functions of non-governmental organisations and organisations at the grassroots level as well as volunteers ... in the fields of disaster prevention, emergency rescue, relief and donation work, medical, hygiene and quarantine work, post-disaster reconstruction, psychological support and other aspects. (State Council, 2009)

Despite granting civic organisations a legitimate status in participation, some incentive was introduced to encourage routine charitable giving. For example, a preferential taxation system was introduced in January 2008 which lifted the tax-free

portion of expenses for charitable donations by enterprises from 3 percent of annual taxable income to 12 percent of the total annual profit. This proportion was higher than similar policies in many developed countries (Gao and Yuan, 2008). Donations made in 2008 by enterprise or personally were exempt from taxable income altogether (State Council, 2009).

These measures not only reflected the government's recognition of civic organisations' relative strength in affairs that were 'societal', but were consistent with the government's broader goals on social development. They were more than pressure-induced interim changes. In the past, the government had tried hard to nurture social cohesion for an increasingly divisive and exclusive society by promoting fraternity and volunteerism. In Party rhetoric, this was embedded in a discursive ideological construction called the 'socialist core value system', an ongoing state project that was designed to become the dominating 'moral and ideological base of social harmony' (CCTV, 2006).

Many argued that Chinese society since the reform has existed without a coherent value system after the collapse of the Marxist class struggle-based value system. In the face of a mounting social cleavage, the CCP has created dazzling ideological projects in an attempt to glue society together and legitimise itself, with the socialist core value system as the latest addition. For Xing (2009), this updated elaboration of socialist values was post-Marxist in essence, in that it abandoned class analysis while embracing Scandinavian social democracy in terms of cultural and political attributes (but not political institutions). Lin (2006) went so far as to contend that socialist core values should not reject universal values such as liberty, equality and fraternity.

Given the pressing need for social cohesion and harmony, it was natural that the Party endorsed fraternity, philanthropy and volunteerism as part of its core values. Indeed, Hu put forward a popular version of the core value system in the so called 'eight honour

and eight disgrace', which included the phrase, 'honour those who help each other, and shame on those who seek gains at the expense of others' (Xinhua, 2006c). There was no reason not to tolerate civil society activities related to these.

The huge disaster fostered a feeling of common suffering and enhanced common identity. It also stimulated a huge upspring of philanthropy. It was an excellent opportunity for the Party to demonstrate its commitment to rebuilding the societal moral base, and, to build on this, a more efficient and institutionalised social partnership on disaster management. Moreover, by allowing different forms of popular participation in the immediate aftermath when the nature of the event was still very apolitical, the Party's political hegemony would not be threatened (Roney, 2011). Party officials publicly acknowledged popular participation. 'The orderly participation of volunteer organisations in the relief effort did not dilute the Party's role as the stronghold of battle; rather, the Party better fulfilled such roles with their participation', said Ou Yangsong, vice chief of the Central Organisational Department at a press conference (Gov.cn, 2008d).

II. Control

While the Party supported civil society activities overall, micro-level constraints were also palpable⁷². It was fair to say that at least the Party had a preference over what types of participation to support, to 'leave alone' and to control. And this tendency was becoming more obvious as time elapsed. The above discussion treated civil society as a whole, and we now need to break it down and discern different categories of participation.

The first category was the most organised participation, that was, participation via GONGOs, for example, with the CYL, the Red Cross Society or university research

⁷² At the risk of oversimplification, it could also be said that the central government supported civil society in the relief effort overall, whereas local governments with which NGOs must deal, imposed a number of practical constraints on civil society.

institutes on social work. This category was intra-system (*tizhi nei*) and was regarded as the most trustworthy politically by local governments. The local branch of the CYL often led on behalf of the local government the above-mentioned partnership between the local government and civic organisations in coordinating relief. For these GONGOs, most of their participating members were formally registered volunteers, i.e. official volunteers. They enjoyed largely unrestricted access to the quake zone as well as local authorities there. In some cases, their participation was even recommended by the government at a higher level. For example, the Jiannan Social Work Group – affiliated with Beijing Normal University’s School of Social Development and Public Policy and founded by its vice dean who also sat on the expert committee of a national level earthquake response task force – was recommended by the government of Deyang city to work in one of its jurisdictions, the Town of Jiannan (Tan et al, 2009). Participation in this category had strong government ties and was supported by local governments.

The second category included large enterprises and entrepreneur associations which were eager to demonstrate corporate social responsibility. This category was not as closely affiliated with the government as the first category, but was trustworthy politically. Although they were outside the formal Party-state structure, these people had considerable connections with the government and their activities remained strictly apolitical. Particularly during the period of reconstruction, these enterprises were in a more or less symbiotic relation with local governments. Local governments needed to rejuvenate the local economy (again GDPism continued) in which large enterprises could give an investment boost while these enterprises gained a responsible reputation locally and nationally⁷³. This category was therefore welcomed by local governments. In a town where Wanke, China’s largest estate developer, invested heavily in reconstruction, there were

⁷³ A manager at Wanke whom I interviewed said that his company decided to invest lots of money in Sichuan because there was mounting social pressure on them for not having donated enough.

many posters along the streets saying ‘Thankful to Wanke, caring for the disaster area’, ‘Happy homeland, we have Wanke’, all of which were put up by the township Party committee and government (Tan et al, 2009).

The third category belonged to well established, high capacity NGOs offering professional skills and services that government agencies lacked, such as psychological help. They had neither strong government ties nor excess financial resources, but they ‘demonstrated to local governments that they do not wish to serve as a substitute for government, but as a complement’ (Teets, 2009:331). In other words, they were there to help the government to achieve its own goals without promoting their identity to a great extent. Some of these organisations had previously worked for government sponsored projects and they were experienced with detecting and not going beyond the confined institutional boundaries. Their presence was therefore acceptable to local governments, although the chance of their continued presence was diminishing as the projects in which they were involved were completed..

The last category was mostly unwelcomed by local governments. It included individual volunteers without formal registration; people joined together in an ad hoc fashion based on specific issues (e.g. help the victims) rather than around an organisation; and grassroots NGO with a low profile. People in this category were no less sympathetic than those in the categories mentioned above; in fact, many of them travelled long distances on their own just to offer help. But they did not have as much to offer as trained volunteers or professional social workers because some of them were volunteering for the first time. Similarly, these low capacity NGOs were inexperienced in working in critical conditions. Once they arrived, they were overwhelmed by practical problems on logistics, accounting procedures and communication with the government (Zeng and Chen, 2010). Some people ended up being taken care of by the soldiers who were supposed to rescue the

victims (Teets, 2009). Although the state media gave substantial coverage on unofficial individual volunteers, the main point was to praise their altruism and thus perpetuate this good quality rather than acknowledging what they did. Another worry of local governments was that this substantial influx of outsiders could become the source of political disorder if they were to pursue goals other than relief. Groups whose main sources of funding were from overseas were particularly suspect because the government was unsure who they were and what they intended. Concerns over stability contributed to the government's distrusting them. In fact, just one week after the quake, any NGOs or individual volunteers wanting to enter the affected area had to seek approval from the government or a major GONGO (Chou and Sun, 2009). As early as July 2008, Zundao township had stopped accepting any incoming unregistered volunteers. And on 14 April 2009, the CYL of Mianzhu city ordered that, according to instructions from a political meeting on preserving stability, all individuals and groups without 'legal' (registered) status should leave (Tan et al, 2009).

From the above discussion, it was clear that government attitudes towards different quarters of civil society varied greatly depending on their political trustworthiness and 'usefulness'. The government supported all those politically safe organisations as well as those that could contribute to the economy; it tended to leave professional groups without political objectives alone; it constrained those without either political connections or usefulness. In sum, it only encouraged participation that complemented and consolidated the legitimacy of the Party-state.

5.5 The Aftermath of the Earthquake

5.5.1 Civil Society Involvement in Reconstruction

As the focus of the event gradually shifted from life saving to reconstruction and rebuilding communities, blame apportioning became the emerging theme where the dialogue between state and society was getting more contentious. It marked the gradual closing window of openness, as well as the strong resurgence of the state's control mentality which the initial period of relief effort was thought to have changed. This period featured the contestation over two key issues: civil society involvement in reconstruction and the school construction scandal.

Previous discussions have indicated a clear preference of the Party regarding different types of civil society participation, and as the event unfolded, it only validated the points raised. There was a subtle change in balance between the governmental capacity and civil society activities in favour of the government as soon as reconstruction started. The governmental capacity was much stronger in the reconstruction than in the initial disaster relief because government apparatus and functions affected by the earthquake were quickly restored. It was also important to bear in mind the context that in recent years, and especially since the financial crisis in 2008, the fiscal capacity of the central government has significantly increased and it has been actively using this capacity to strengthen itself by taking on responsibilities where civil society may be more appropriate to shoulder.

Fiscally, the State Council in June 2008 promulgated the 'Wenchuan Earthquake Post-Disaster Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Master Plan'. It pledged to restore or surpass the pre-quake basic standard of living and level of socio-economic development in three years (Xinhua, 2008k). According to the plan, a total of ¥1 trillion (more than \$150

bn)⁷⁴ would be spent on reconstruction (Gov.cn, 2008a). This massive amount inflated the confidence of the Chinese state and its officials over what the state could do; this mentality inevitably affected Sichuan's construction as well. It turned a state-led campaign into a state-dominated one which profoundly affected the civil society presence.

As a result, civic organisations, apart from those deemed politically trustworthy by the state, faced a severe crowding out effect owing to massive state investment, even if they had been working alongside the state in a complementary way. Local governments regarded them as potential competitors in serving the affected population in the fear that more local people would turn to them for help instead of the government⁷⁵. There was also the concern that the central government and other international organisations may regard local government work to be ineffective as indicated by a big 'share' of the population using services provided by civic organisations. This distrust from local governments along with a significant variation in group capacity led to the retreat of many small groups. The rejuvenated government apparatus did not need them anymore.

At a deeper level, this somewhat forced retreat of civil society reflected the Party's political calculation on the attribution of credibility. For the Party, reconstruction was as important as the initial relief in consolidating regime legitimacy. While it was just in time to demonstrate during the relief that it would fly to save the people whenever they were in trouble, during the reconstruction it could also demonstrate that the Party was committed to compensate much more than what the 'nature' had taken from the people. As the slogan went, 'Disasters have no mercy, but the people do, and the Party does'. It also explained why in past disasters, the government often (deliberately) finished the reconstruction ahead of schedule. It utilised opportunities like this to demonstrate its commitment and effectiveness. Therefore, civil society would find little breathing space in these government

⁷⁴ This counted for about a quarter of the 4 trillion Yuan stimulus package announced in late 2008 when the effect of the global financial crisis on China became apparent.

⁷⁵ Interview with the leader of an alumni group which contributed funds and supplies to the affected area.

showcases. The Party sought a monopoly on its perceived credentials from the people, and it would simply not allow civil society to get involved substantively in reconstruction.

5.5.2 The School Collapse Scandal

Another contested issue relating to the government's containment of civil society was the shoddy school scandal; it was another piece of evidence that the Party was concerned more about its own image than justice if confronted with the dilemma of promoting both. According to official statistics, as many as 5,335 students lost their lives or were missing in the earthquake in Sichuan province alone (Xinhua, 2009e). Such a high death toll of students raised the question about corruption – a possibility that the central authorities at the beginning did not rule out. In fact, the answer was straightforward – these schools all collapsed, whereas most nearby government and commercial buildings stood, suggesting that there must have been malpractice in enforcing building standards if not outright corruption. In response to the scepticism, the central government ordered an investigation as early as May 2008, but their conclusion was questionable – they found no evidence of cutting corners but attributed school collapse mainly to poor design and engineering, and asserted the collapse was 'inevitable' (Xinhua, 2009e). Note that the crackdown on cutting corners in school construction could have been a high profile case that demonstrated a government commitment to fighting corruption, and that the government did so in the Jiang-Zhu era when newly finished dams and bridges suddenly collapsed. But this time the scale of the problem in Sichuan was too big – some 7,000 classrooms crumbled. Sichuan's provincial government would have looked very embarrassed if such a campaign was launched. Similarly, the central government could not bear the high political costs associated with admitting such widespread corruption. In addition, the final report of the

investigation was released in May 2009, close to the 20th anniversary of Tiananmen. Even if severe problems were found during the investigation, they were likely to be covered up in the belief that any indication of corruption in the report would spark political disorder in the run up to a sensitive anniversary.

In addition, the way the government dealt with angry parents – many of whom lost their only child because of shoddy school construction – was confronted by fierce criticism. It questioned the government's sincerity regarding its asserted principle of 'putting people first' and confirmed the above discussion that the state's control mentality would be inflated by any civil society movement that appeared to challenge the state. For example, parents who gathered to protest and demand justice were surrounded by police and discouraged from making such appeals (BBC, 2008b). Those who did get involved in helping grieving parents faced considerable personal risk. Journalists were also removed from the scene. Even worse, those who conducted independent investigations into the school construction scandal were deemed to be directly challenging the state. Rights activist Tan Zuoren and university professor Guo Quan were sentenced to 5 years and 10 years in prison respectively for subverting the state. The crackdown appeared to be very heavy-handed because in most cases the state would not normally jail university academics.

Grieving parents were eventually offered financial compensation for their lost children and the central government took measures to ensure the quality of school constructions, using 'double the usual amount of steel at five times the cost of a normal building' (China Daily, 2009a). Nevertheless, such issues could have been good examples where civil society could play an important intermediation role as well as providing policy inputs if the state were to encourage participation, which was exactly the case in Taiwan after the 921 earthquake (Roney, 2011). But the fact that the Chinese state bypassed any intermediation and chose to deal directly with the parents – and make decisions alone with

little contribution from civil society – showed the state’s continued desire for control and political hegemony. It disliked any intermediation mechanism (however apolitical or unthreatening) that could potentially increase the bargaining power of ordinary people. It was also reluctant to institutionalise civic participation found in the initial relief effort, but habitually went one step back to the usual practice of pacifying grievances through ‘buying’ stability.

5.6 Conclusion

After a critical, detailed analysis on the politics of the Sichuan earthquake, the findings have been very mixed. On the one hand, broad progress was made in terms of transparency and openness, where previous crisis management paradigms of opaqueness and stressing self-reliance dramatically shifted to open communication and to accepting limited aid. They were the outcomes from previous crisis experiences, but more importantly, these changes ‘reflect the immense political and technological changes of the past 30 years, including the end of the Cold War, the institution of economic reforms, and the introduction of information technology’ (Roney, 2011:85), as well as the limited demonstration of the Party’s discourse on ‘putting people first’. In addition, the government also demonstrated its commitment to the people by shaking up the entire political system and allowing limited popular participation. All these changes served to enhance the Party’s legitimacy.

However, most of these changes were not institutionalised for the benefit of better crisis management in the future, simply because without political reform these changes at the administrative level and the reformative momentum associated with these changes were unlikely to be sustained. As a result, government confidence faded as openness

turned out to expose more problems; there were strong evidence of the tendency towards the pre-quake status quo, mostly reflected in the government's attitude toward civil society in reconstruction and the way the government dealt with grieving parents. It raised speculation that all the exciting progress found in the initial relief efforts was highly contingent on the specific political context of 2008 – the year of the Olympics. The Chinese state wanted to showcase before the world what China was and what it stood for, and also showcase before its own people where China stood in the world. It meant these changes were superficial and one-off; they were gone when the Olympics was over.

In fact, even when the Olympics was still underway, the milk scandal crisis already began to unfold slowly; ironically, it was routinely covered up by the government for the sake of preserving China's image. There was also a strong wave of political contraction shortly after the Olympics which lasted through the 20th anniversary of Tiananmen, the Xinjiang Riot in summer 2009, the 60th anniversary of the founding of the PRC, and the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize Award to Liu Xiaobo. In many ways, the post-earthquake level of political openness dropped to below its pre-earthquake level. The most apparent evidence lay in the 3-year anniversary of the quake, commemorated around May 2011.

In the run up to the anniversary, the Party propaganda machinery was operating at full strength to propagate achievements in the reconstruction projects. This propaganda campaign lasted for a month, with no criticism and no reflection but mostly praise of the Party. An anonymous professor I interviewed commented that 'it was so ridiculous that the earthquake was just for a day, but the Party spent a whole month praising itself on what it has done in the reconstruction'. According to the theme of praising the Party, CCTV ran a commemorative performance called 'The Chinese Miracle'. So far, the old reflex of

politicising crises peaked. It was a backwards step towards the crisis management tactics ‘manipulating a bad thing as if it is a good one’ – the usual practice of the Mao era.

It was interesting to deconstruct the central theme of this performance as summarised by a Xinhua report:

It warmly extolled the Chinese people under the determined leadership of the Central Committee with Comrade Hu Jintao as the general secretary ... seized a great victory in earthquake relief and reconstruction ... reflected the happiness of people in the affected area who now have a new life and that they praise: the Communist Party is good, socialism is good, reform and opening up is good, the great motherland is good, the People’s Army is good and people of all ethnics are good. (Xinhua, 2011e)

Note that this rhetoric not only reflected the Party’s attempt to consolidate the status quo by reiterating the superiority of the current system in order to resist any significant political reform, but the Party went a step further by making a discursive ideational construction that linked achievements in the past with the leadership’s political preferences for the present and for the future. It echoed what we discussed above that there was often a ‘tenuous relationship’ between the crisis itself and its proposed solution which rested on political elites’ preferences at the time (Thornton, 2009). For the author, ‘reform and opening up’ and ‘people of all ethnics’ were only remotely relevant to the quake relief, yet they were listed as part of the solution because the Party leadership wanted to garner support from reconstruction achievements to push for further market liberalisation, as well as continuing the contentious ethnic minority policies. It highlighted that the practice of politicising crises did not fundamentally change and suggested a higher level of manipulation that served multiple purposes.

Chapter 6: Case Study Three: The Sanlu Milk

Scandal

6.1 Introduction

The tainted milk incident was an international scandal exposing systematic problems with governance in China, shortly after the country hosted a highly successful Olympics. It highlighted the contradictory nature of China's state capacity: the same government could pull off mega projects like the Olympics and sending men into space, but could not ensure even the most basic livelihood issue of food safety (Blecher, 2009). A closely related question asks what this tells us about crisis management, a crucial component of overall state capacity? Why could China marshal whatever it had in a short period of time following the Sichuan earthquake to undertake an internationally praised and timely rescue, but could do little either to prevent the milk scandal from unfolding or to avoid many more food scares afterwards? The milk scandal is therefore worth investigating in terms of its value in revealing the arguably contradictory nature of the CCP-style crisis management.

Moreover, the milk scandal serves as a good reference point in relation to the SARS epidemic and the Sichuan earthquake. In many ways the milk scandal is similar to SARS. They were both covered up initially by local authorities until international pressure prompted drastic and decisive responses from the central government. But they were also different in that SARS was largely a one-off crisis, whereas the milk scandal is a part of an ongoing product safety crisis with 'Made in China' goods which has not yet ended.

Likewise, there is much comparability between the milk scandal and the Sichuan earthquake. Given the timing that the two crises took place one after another, it was easy to tell whether the political space – which briefly opened following the earthquake – has been extended into the government's handling of the milk scandal; or, to be more precise, whether the transparency, openness and accountability yielded in the earthquake have been institutionalised and found in the government's managing of the milk scandal. These similarities as well as differences will then help us to reflect back on initial findings regarding the CCP's crisis management. The choice of the milk scandal as the final case study will thus enhance the explanatory power of our findings regarding the strength, weakness and sustainability of the CCP's crisis management.

6.2 The Tainted Milk

Food safety issues have beset both developing and developed countries from time to time as a result of the intensified integration of the global food production chain. What made the milk scandal all the more inexcusable was that, rather than being a result of loose quality control (as is the case with most food safety issues), the tainted milk was caused by deliberate poisoning. Chinese-made milk and powdered infant formula were laced with melamine, a chemical commonly used in plastic production and the addition of which into food is prohibited worldwide. The adulteration was made in order to increase the apparent protein content of inferior milk when tested (WHO, 2008). According to the Chinese government, 30 million children have drunk tainted milk, out of which almost 300,000 fell ill and 6 died (Guardian, 2008; Xinhua, 2010c).

Warning signs emerged as early as March 2008 when the Sanlu group, the principal culprit in the milk scandal, received complaints about babies who had consumed their milk

falling ill; and yet the company neither reported it to the health authorities nor made an official recall. As complaints surged – and it was found that melamine was added into inferior raw milk by farmers for the purpose of fooling testing devices so that their milk would appear to be protein rich, and thus sold at a better price – the company in early August 2008 reported the contamination to the Shijiazhuang city government where it was based, and only made a trade recall (an internal recall which was only known to the retailers but not to the consumers) to avoid bad publicity (Sina.com, 2008d). The Shijiazhuang government, however, concealed the scandal for over a month whilst ignoring the urge for an official product recall from Fonterra, a New Zealand dairy giant which owned a 43% stake in Sanlu's. Fonterra then referred the case to the New Zealand government which eventually bypassed local governments in China and alerted Beijing directly regarding the incident on 8 September 2008 (BBC, 2008e).

The Chinese central government stepped in after the crisis became international. It treated the scandal seriously and ordered an overhaul of the country's dairy industry, but the scale of the problem turned out to be grave after the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (GAQSIQ) tested 491 sample batches of products from all 109 baby milk producers. The result showed that along with Sanlu, 21 other major producers also produced melamine-laced baby milk of various levels of contamination. Sanlu's product contained the highest level of contamination: 2,563 mg/kg of melamine was found, which was more than 135 times higher than the Tolerable Daily Limit for a child weighing 30 kg (Xinhua, 2008p; Zhao and Lim, 2008). Consumer confidence in domestic dairy producers crumbled and people turned to foreign brands and other milk substitutes. Many mothers who lost faith in the safety of milk turned to breastfeeding their babies (Global times, 2011).

This finding of rampant adulteration in milk products triggered waves of international panic, as more countries seized contaminated food from China or products which used ingredients from China. At least 27 countries in Africa, Asia and Europe either banned the import of Chinese milk products or recalled such products (Reuters, 2008b). The WHO said it was one of the largest food safety incidents with which it had had to deal in recent years (VOA, 2008b). The scandal tarnished China's slightly improved image – which had been gathered in the Sichuan earthquake and the Olympics – as the international community questioned whether China had really become more open as a result of the Games.

6.3 The Root Causes of the Problem

6.3.1 Economic Causes

The milk scandal was first and foremost a systematic crisis rather than an industrial one. Nevertheless, the economic motives that led to political wrongdoing afterwards should not be downplayed. If we could somehow decompose the milk scandal into two phases – adulteration and the subsequent cover up – then clearly the cause of the problem with adulteration alone had a lot to do with economic factors at corporate and industrial levels. Through a comparative lens, evidence from the rapidly industrialising, 19th century Britain, revealed that economic factors were as important as regulatory and scientific factors in ensuring food safety (Collins, 1993).

The milk scandal occurred against a backdrop in which China's dairy industry soared in the past decade. This was the result of: changing consumer preference as Chinese people enjoyed higher standards of living; the government's active promotion in

developing the dairy industry; and the availability of more marketing channels (Fuller et al, 2006). Total dairy production jumped nearly fivefold, from about 14 million tonnes in 2000 to more than 70 million tonnes in 2007. Annual consumption in per capita terms also increased nearly fourfold, from 7kg in 2000 to about 27kg in 2007 (Zhao and Lim, 2010). It only took the Chinese dairy industry fewer than ten years to achieve what their western counterparts spent decades developing, but what came with this extraordinary growth was also great risk (Qian et al, 2011), as was the case with other cheap 'Made in China' goods.

Owing to booming demand on the one hand, and fierce competition among dairy firms for raw milk supply on the other, the quality control of raw milk was compromised. In the years prior to the scandal, most domestic dairy firms had focused on wrestling for a larger market share instead of farm management (Qian et al, 2011). These firms only owned a small number of milk farms and sourced most of their supply of raw milk from private milk stations, the majority of which had no licence (Qian et al, 2011). These milk stations were also in tough competition with each other because there were so many of them, a result of the government promoting the local animal husbandry industry (Zhao and Lim, 2010). The pressure and incentive to reduce costs, along with the fact that dairy firms had no direct control over raw milk quality, created much room for cutting corners. Adding melamine into watered down or inferior milk, and feeding cows with cheap feeds bulked up with melamine, thus became an open secret between milk dealers and farmers (The Telegraph, 2008). In addition, the price cap placed by the government on staple food, including milk products in early 2008, exacerbated the problem (Zhao and Lim, 2010).

The dairy firms were equally guilty. Owing to the focus on market share, they accepted whatever raw milk was available, regardless of what was being added, even if the milk did not pass their own test (The Telegraph, 2008). The cost pressure on producing affordable milk products for less wealthy regions forced dairy firms into using all sorts of

corner-cutting measures in production. For example, the milk scandal first emerged in July 2008 in Gansu province, a hinterland region, where babies were diagnosed to have kidney stones after consuming Sanlu's cheap formula for the rural market which was sold for only ¥18, half the price of the equivalent on the market.

The milk scandal revealed the prevailing norm of business conduct, the 'law of jungle', in China's rapacious, capitalist economy, and revealed a race to the bottom in terms of product safety and business ethics. A WHO official described it as 'a large scale intentional activity to deceive consumers for simple, basic, short-term profits' (VOA, 2008b).

6.3.2 Political and Systematic Causes

Wilson (2008) drew similarities between the melamine milk scandal in China in 2008 and the 'swill milk' scandal in the US in the 1850s in which some 8,000 reportedly died after drinking watered down milk adulterated with plaster of Paris, starch, eggs and molasses. He indicated that scandals like these were not just about the lust for money, but a failure of politics with respective governments which were unable or unwilling to regulate food quality (Wilson, 2008).

In the Chinese case, when taking into account the developmental role of the government in the economy, and the absence of substantive checks and balances, the Sanlu scandal exposed nothing less than a systemic crisis.

I. GDPism and the Race to the Bottom

The systemic failure should first be attributed to the local government's exclusive focus on economic growth in the form of GDPism. As mentioned above, tough competition could be traced to government policies. For Hebei province where Sanlu was based, Hebei had a comparative advantage in the dairy and husbandry industry because of a suitable climate and good availability of farmland (Zhao and Lim, 2010). Since leader performance was largely assessed on GDP growth, Hebei had been putting great efforts into developing its dairy and husbandry industry by attracting investment. For example, Hebei had been very open to local as well as non-local dairy firms, and allowed dairy giants such as Yili and Mengniu, both headquartered in Inner Mongolia, to operate locally in Hebei (Zhao and Lim, 2010). The local market was gradually saturated as these domestic producers were concentrated on the lower end or budget segment of the market (Reuters, 2008c). As a survival strategy, they undercut each other on price. Dairy farmers who supplied mainly to these firms were disadvantaged as a result of price cuts because they already had the lowest profit margin in the entire production chain (Qian et al, 2011).

While developing the local economy was entirely justified and, in principle, creating competition was good for consumers, local governments deserved the blame for their laissez-faire policies. Their policies favoured capital investment, whilst neglecting the interests of dairy farmers and the ecological consequences of an over-expanded husbandry industry. In the process, local governments reaped decent GDP figures and abundant tax revenues (Liu and Wang, 2010). However, they failed to establish a sound institution for quality inspections and fair competition, without which the market was more likely to favour a culture of 'race to the bottom' or 'pitting one against another'. This was especially true for the budget segment of the dairy industry in which added value was low owing to a lack of innovation.

II. Regulatory Capture

Furthermore, GAQSIQ's policy of inspection exemption effectively relieved local governments from supervising famous brands such as Sanlu. According to the regulation,

Products whose quality have been stable for long, whose market share is high, whose producer's own quality standards meet or surpass national standards and have passed GAQSIQ or its provincial branch's quality test for more than three consecutive times may be determined as products exempt from inspection ... they may use the 'exempt from inspection' sign and be exempt from various inspections by various agencies for a certain period ... whenever they are found to have quality problems, their 'exempt from inspection' status will be deprived and their producers severely punished according to relevant laws. (State Council, 1999)

This regulation was initially designed to enable trusted firms to resist local government's rent-seeking in the name of market inspections⁷⁶. It was the product of the Jiang-Zhu era when market deregulation and liberalisation had been prevalent. Proponents of this exemption policy contended that these measures improved administrative efficiency in that the government could devote its limited inspection resources to products that were nevertheless not listed as exemptions. Furthermore, it was stipulated clearly in the regulation that trusted products were only exempt from inspection for 'a certain period', usually a period of three years; this therefore lowered the frequency of inspections, but did not abolish them (Shen, 2009). The exemption policy was welcomed by firms whose products enjoyed an exemption status. Policy feedback in 2006 showed that these firms saw large increases in sales, market share and exports after the exemption policy came into effect (Shen, 2009).

The policy had a palpable pro-capital tinge. Those exempt from inspection products were mostly produced by large enterprises, a category of business which the exemption

⁷⁶ Before the regulation on inspection exemption was enacted, local governments had used product quality inspections as opportunities for rent-seeking. For example, they awarded the trusted brand privilege to companies which paid them a lot of money. Or, in the case of local protectionism, local governments might endorse local brands regardless of the quality inspection results.

policy was supposed to support. By 2006, the inspection exemption comprised 105 categories of products produced by 2,152 major firms, and these products covered almost every aspect of daily life (Xinhua, 2006d). It was questionable whether exemptions on such a large scale involved ‘regulatory capture’ (Bhatta, 2006), as GAQSIQ established in order to protect consumers against unsafe products turned out to serve industrial interests through loosening control, and the benefits of such exemptions were concentrated in the hands of a few producers, whereas the huge potential risks associated with product inspection exemptions were widely dispersed among individual consumers.

But what was almost certain was that such exemptions created ample room for rent-seeking on the part of GAQSIQ, as firms were eager to pursue the exempt status for their products. Provided that GAQSIQ was the only legitimate agency to determine such a status, it had a great incentive to maintain and expand the system. Although in principle exempt products would still be subject to random checks, and their exempt status would be challenged if consumers lodged complaints, in practice cases of disqualification had been rare. First, since random checks conducted by the national GAQSIQ were the only legitimate ones, they would miss out a lot of unsafe products because the national agency only had limited resources. Second, since the lists of exempt products were enacted by GAQSIQ at the provincial level and above, local GAQSIQ offices at the city level and below had no incentive to challenge products on the safe lists which were endorsed by agencies at a higher level, even if sporadic complaints were received. In addition, given that collective actions among Chinese consumers had been rare and discouraged, the exemption policy effectively covered up many product quality issues in the course of its validity.

From a somewhat conspiratorial perspective, the exemption emboldened firms to produce unsafe products for a maximum of three years – the period of governance vacuum

between when the exemption was granted and the renewal of such a status three years later, was nothing less than an ‘invitation to swindling’ (Wilson, 2008). In fact, the Sanlu story suggested that this inference was entirely logical – the company’s milk powder was granted an exemption from inspection status in 2003 and that was renewed in 2006 (Beijing News, 2008). However, its products were seized in a milk scandal broke out in Anhui province in 2004 because of their inferior quality (Nanfang Daily, 2008b), and quality issues resurged in 2008 on a much larger scale and in greater seriousness. Both scandals took place soon after the exemption was granted. The exemption policy did little to improve product safety but allowed quality issues to surface one after another.

Moreover, GAQSIQ did what a ‘small government’ (a popular idea with the Jiang–Zhu administration) should not get involved – active market intervention through promotion of some products over others. This was not just about economic justice, but the politics of government credibility. In China, where both the consumers’ awareness about the right to information and the development of consumer interest groups were weak, the government-endorsed list of exemptions amounted to outright official recommendations to consumers (Shen, 2009). The political risk of doing this was enormous as these recommendations were so partial in the context of information asymmetry. Once any of the endorsed firms were caught for misconduct, the government that backed them was also faced with formidable pressure and would see its credibility tarnished as much as that of bad businesses. In the 2008 milk scandal, seven major domestic dairy firms, including the national top three – Sanlu, Yili and Mengniu – were all on the safe list but were all caught for adding melamine. The millions who consumed these products would surely point their fingers at the government in addition to these producers. The central government was virtually kidnapped by these bad businesses and GAQSIQ’s hands-off policies. The scandal was an utter government failure (Zhao and Lim, 2010).

III. Fragmented Authoritarianism

The situation with exempt brands had been grave, but what about those smaller firms which were not exempt from inspection, and, in theory, were constantly on the monitoring radar? GAQSIQ's quality test after the scandal broke out revealed that they were equally, if not more, problematic. Out of the 22 firms caught for adding melamine, 15 of them did not belong to the exempt category. It was certain that the problem was industry wide, rather than just being with those with or without exempt status. The state council blamed the industry for its 'chaotic order' and its regulator whose supervision had been 'gravely absent' (The Australian, 2008). It was largely the result of a fragmented legal framework and institutional design for regulating food safety, regardless of whether the products were exempt from inspection or not.

China had no single, all encompassing act regarding food safety until the Food Safety Law of the PRC came into effect in June 2009. As a good demonstration of a fragmented regulatory system, before the 2008 milk scandal China's legal framework for food safety comprised nearly 20 laws, 40 administrative provisions, 150 sector rules and regulatory documents in effect which were formulated by different government agencies at different times (Chen, 2009). The regulatory regime seemed extensive, but it was deeply defective since many of the regulations were either outmoded or confusing. Some crucial areas were even not regulated at all. For instance, milk collection centres, which only began to operate recently as a new link in the production chain, were not regulated before the milk scandal (Zhao and Lim, 2010).

The regime of standardisation also lagged behind rapid development. The testing of melamine for milk products was not included in any Chinese national standards until October 2008, despite an earlier food safety crisis which occurred in 2007 in which the

same chemical was found in Chinese export pet food that killed many American pets (Washington Post, 2007).

The punishment for the violation of food safety regulations was also minimal compared to the huge potential for illegal gains, giving no deterrence to malpractice. In addition, China operated a double standard system of food quality control. Foods for export were governed by a different set of regulations, separated from domestic food products, with the export standard significantly more stringent than the domestic one.

The enforcement of the above legal framework was also fragmented and complex since there were more than a dozen government agencies involved in food safety supervision and the coordination among them was poor. The Chinese government regulated the food industry according to a principle of supervision by segment – i.e. from production to consumption, food safety supervision was divided into a series of interlinked segments with each government agency responsible for its own segment. For example, the Ministry of Agriculture was responsible for supervising the production of primary agricultural products; GAQSIQ was assigned the supervision of food processing; the Industry and Commerce Administration supervised distribution related matters; the MOH supervised the food consumption segment, including the supervision of restaurants and canteens; and local governments were charged with the overall responsibility of supervising food safety in their jurisdictions (Gov.cn, 2004)⁷⁷.

In a modern society where the risk of food safety was scattered in all these segments, a single food safety issue may involve multiple agencies that, in China's case, were reluctant to work together, but were used to adhering to their own practices. This cumbersome structure resulted in delays in dealing with food scares. For example, in the

⁷⁷ This apparently clear-cut division of labour, however, was not always strictly followed. In areas with plenty of rent seeking potential, for example, the supervision of food processing, there were too many agencies trying to exert influence through various inspections (they charged a fee for every inspection undertaken) before GAQSIQ was designated to solely take charge of supervising food processing. This internal wrangling was an important source of poor food safety governance.

Sanlu scandal, consumers registered complaints on the GAQSIQ website's bulletin board as early as June 2008, but GAQSIQ replied, 'we have a deep concern about this and are now actively working on this along with other departments, but you should also inform the MOH about this' (Nanfang Daily, 2008a). A MOH expert said that investigations like this involved a lot of coordination, so they did not release the findings of the investigation until September (three months after the first complaints), and they had already been 'relatively quick', from his point of view (Sina.com, 2008b). It was no coincidence that after every major food safety crisis the central government had to set up ad hoc LSGs to bring all agencies together in order to tackle the issue, and dispatch directives reiterating the division of labour among agencies and the importance of concerted efforts⁷⁸.

A single agency responsible for food safety, the State Food and Drug Administration, did exist from 2003. Although it was supposed to be responsible for 'comprehensive supervision and coordination' on food safety and to 'investigate and handle serious incidents according to the law' (Gov.cn, 2004), its weak institutional status within the political system compared to other agencies had prevented it from fulfilling its designated duties, and rendered it marginal in monitoring the food industry. The Administration only had a ranking equivalent to sub-ministerial level in the government hierarchy; that was, half a level lower than full ministerial level agencies such as the MOH, the Ministry of Agriculture and GAQSIQ. In China's bureaucratic politics where ranking mattered most, the State Food and Drug Administration's junior ranking meant that it could not effectively coordinate efforts in which cooperation from other higher ranking agencies was needed. This was supported by evidence from the news coverage of the Sanlu scandal in which the Administration was rarely mentioned, and in which the MOH and GAQSIQ dominated the handling of this crisis.

⁷⁸ See for example, The State Council Directive on Further Strengthening the Work on Food Safety, available at http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2005-08/12/content_22130.htm

In China's political system there have been continuing problems that crucial policy areas were governed by agencies with a very limited political capacity to regulate that area effectively. Food safety was only one example. Previously, the problem also existed with environmental protection. The problem was not partly relieved until the former, sub-ministerial level State Environmental Protection Administration was promoted to become the ministerial level Ministry of Environmental Protection in 2008.

The regulatory difficulty with food safety legislation and enforcement exposed the fact that existing political and administrative structures in the country were outpaced not only by the country's extraordinary economic growth, but by the potential hazards that came as the side effect of such growth. The SARS crisis in 2003 had already alerted regulators in other policy areas, such as food safety, to keep their regulatory framework at pace with the development of risk. However, a major reshuffling had not been undertaken until the milk scandal broke out.

IV. Local Protectionism and the Symbiotic Relations between Businesses and the Local Government

The last cause of the Sanlu scandal had to do with the 'local protective umbrella' provided to Sanlu by the local government⁷⁹. If we first looked at Sanlu's significance to the local political economy and its image as the pride of Shijiazhuang, we would understand why Shijiazhuang city government chose to shield Sanlu until the crisis was no longer concealable.

⁷⁹ Local protective umbrella, or *difang baohusan*, refers to local governments giving privileged status to big local companies in order to boost the local economy. This often involves some government-business collusion in the forms of, e.g. discriminating against non-local competitors, or covering up the wrongdoings of local companies when they are investigated by superior government agencies.

Sanlu was important to Shijiazhuang both economically and symbolically. It had a glorious history from 1956 when it was established, and later became the first domestic milk powder producer in China (An Alex and An David, 2008). At the time of the milk scandal, Sanlu had around 4,000 employees, along with some 20,000 dairy farmers and 50,000 peasants who regularly supplied to Sanlu. This was not a small number to Shijiazhuang, a city with a modest size economy (and had social stability implications, too, if Sanlu were to go bust). In addition, Sanlu ranked 7th among the 10 largest tax revenue contributors in Shijiazhuang. The first six of these were sector monopolies in high-energy consumption sectors such as steel and petroleum; only Sanlu was a real market player that had competitiveness. ‘It was the hope of Shijiazhuang’ (163 Blog, 2008).

The local government’s reliance on large local businesses to provide employment and tax revenue could be attributed to the tax-sharing system introduced in 1994 which we discussed in Chapter 3. The system was praised for having strengthened the fiscal extractive capacity of the central state which allowed it to rebalance regional developmental discrepancies and implement mega projects one after another that were unimaginable in the past, such as the Three Gorges Dam and the nationwide high-speed railway network. However, it also led to a discrepancy between spending obligations and available fiscal resources for many local governments – i.e. the central government, which was not directly involved in the provision of most public services, collected too much from provinces which were obliged to provide such services. As a result, local governments, especially those at or below the city level, were hard pressed to fund a spiralling budget of basic education, healthcare, housing, etc., out of limited finances⁸⁰. This forced them to exploit every major fundraising opportunity just to fulfil basic government functions. It explained the motivation of local governments in enthusiastically promoting the real estate

⁸⁰ This problem has been worsened by rapid urbanisation through which millions of rural migrants are coming to work in the cities, thus putting extra pressure on the local public expenditure.

sector as well as giving disproportionate (and sometimes discriminatory) support to businesses such as Sanlu.

Other than the fiscal motives of local governments, local officials had firm personal interests in supporting big businesses. As previously mentioned, the combination of GDPism and economic growth as the key indicators when assessing leaders' performance could explain much of the dynamics of the local political economy. Local leaders with a strong sense of careerism were keen to get heavily involved with the developmental strategies of big businesses, in that as the business grew in influence, so did the leader's publicity. Flourishing businesses, an indication of a healthy local economy, could be counted as an important track record of performance, or *zhengji*, when it came to promotion decisions. The local state's developmental role was thus played to the full and even stretched by its officials. It came as no surprise that from the Jiang era, most of the local officials had a packed schedule of meeting executives from local, national and foreign companies to persuade them to operate locally and invest more. This undue mercantilism even resulted in a race to the bottom on labour standards among localities (Chan, 2003), whose leaders were eager to beat competitors in the race to higher posts.

On the other hand, local officials benefited a great deal from the close link with businesses by rent-seeking. These businesses purposely came to a specific locality in pursuit of cheap land, labour or easy access to the local market and to loans from local banks. This created a favourable condition for crony capitalism as local power holders often had a dominating say in deciding these factors of production demanded by the businesses. As a result, local leaders were often invited to become 'silent partners' in large businesses so as to symbolise a 'protective umbrella' they offered to businesses (Lam, 2008). This protective umbrella would secure access to resources, but more importantly,

would prevent lower-level officials from disrupting the day to day operation of the business in the form of outright extortion, such as collecting arbitrary fees⁸¹.

The demand for and supply of rent was one of the most important sources of widespread official corruption. Superficially, it kept the economy going, as exemplified by crony relations between government and business in other Southeast Asian economies and South Korea. However, this symbiotic formation between the local government and the large business, with local officials acting as the nexus caught up between various interests, was detrimental to government credibility and even Party legitimacy, once exposed.

The Sanlu scandal exemplified the above discussion. On the one hand, Sanlu meant a great deal to Shijiazhuang both economically and politically, as mentioned earlier. On the other hand, the local government gave it too much support. Sanlu not only secured preferential treatment in the form of various product quality awards (An Alex and An David, 2008), but enjoyed much political privilege. The company's chairwomen, Tian Wenhua, was honoured as a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the country's highest political advisory body, and she was said to be on 'comradely terms' with Shijiazhuang officials (Lam, 2008)⁸².

Moreover, Sanlu had been able to mobilise local and provincial political connections to cleanse bad publicity or even cover up its wrongdoings. For example, in an earlier milk scandal in 2004 that broke out in Fuyang, Anhui province, a number of dairy producers were believed to have produced inferior milk that made many babies ill. Sanlu's products were among those seized, but it successfully lobbied the Hebei provincial government to appeal to the State Council against the decision to take all Sanlu's products

⁸¹ It is a common and very popular practice for entrepreneurs to hang enlarged photos they took with notable leaders in order to symbolise good government-business relations they are enjoying and to deter lower level officials from extorting bribes from them.

⁸² Sanlu had been a joint venture since 2006, with the New Zealand dairy giant Fonterra owning a 43% shares. But Sanlu still secured such government support in the crisis – circumstantial evidence which suggested that local governments would normally support any big businesses (not just SOEs) regardless of their ownership types as long as they were important to the local economy.

off the shelves. In particular, it lobbied the General Office of the Hebei provincial government to send an urgent ‘Provincial Governor’s Special Remark’ to the State Council, which subsequently resulted in the decision being revoked. Ironically, this case was widely cited as an excellent example of utilising political resources to manage public relations crises by various MBA training materials⁸³. The popularity of these materials suggested worrying, intimate government-business relations because they revealed that local governments would rather use urgent and extraordinary measures to uphold business interests instead of public interests⁸⁴.

Perhaps the success in managing the 2004 crisis emboldened Sanlu further, as when more and more kidney-stone cases surfaced, Sanlu asked Shijiazhuang government to tighten media control so as to preserve social stability (Southern Weekly, 2009a). It came as no surprise that after the exposure of the 2008 scandal, one Shijiazhuang senior official admitted that the government had been ‘too considerate for Sanlu’ (Xinhua, 2008h).

As previously argued, whenever the government played excessive and inappropriate roles in business, it had to bear the political consequences of business malpractice. As such, the Sanlu scandal was a bitter fruit of this interlocking of business, governmental and officials’ personal interests.

6.4 State Control of Information in the Sanlu Scandal

The above section has explained the motives behind the crony interaction between government and business, and why local governments could not effectively resist business

⁸³ For example, see ‘Uncover Sanlu’s Crisis Management in Fuyang’, at http://www.chinatet.com/html/22_126/2008_3_14_su02712514138002564.htm

⁸⁴ In this case, public interests were actually infringed because consumers would get confused by the U-turn of the regulator’s decision. In other cases, emergencies that directly affected public interests were often reported with some delay. So this difference in terms of promptness implied the low priority of public interests in the minds of local officials.

influence in exercising governmental power. This section is going to analyse how state control of information has been infiltrated by business to serve both Party and business interests. In the case of the milk scandal, our analysis will look at how capital played a disreputable role in government crisis management and crisis manipulation. Or, to be more precise, how capital colluded with the state to deprive people of their right to crucial health information. This was different from and more complex than SARS where only the state manipulated information. So, as we will see in the milk scandal, there was a new player, namely the corporate sector involved in intercepting information that should be made available to the public. The influence which businesses could exert on the media was less visible than governmental influence, but more subtle than the latter because these businesses were not subject to virtually any public scrutiny. In short, an understanding of state control of information was inadequate or even misleading without analysing the huge corporate interests involved.

6.4.1 The Immediate Discourse

It came as a surprise that a company like Sanlu could be involved in a scandal of this scale because of its noble reputation in the dairy industry. Nevertheless, revelations after the milk scandal suggested that much of its highly-regarded reputation was ‘bought’ from the media through public relations campaigns. Sanlu was a veteran at media public relations, and as early as 2004 in an aforementioned milk scandal, Sanlu put a lot of efforts in buying off media. According to another report boasting about Sanlu’s effective crisis management, ‘we used our extensive media connections to launch a public relations campaign ...within one day, we informed 93 media outlets, and 19 of them removed Sanlu from the list of inferior milk. At the same time, the company wrote more than 10 news reports and

published them in more than 20 authoritative newspapers ... the campaign peaked when CCTV clarified things for us' (Gao, 2005).

Given its track record in utilising the media for business interests, other examples of its collusion with the media seemed entirely natural. More ironically, members of the public found that in September 2007 (about three months before the problem appeared), CCTV produced a 'Weekly Quality Report' dedicated to praising the superior quality of Sanlu, in which Sanlu milk was proclaimed to have passed more than 1,100 quality tests before being sold, and that Sanlu exemplified that "Made in China" doesn't just mean affordable or good value for money, but represents safe, superior quality and reliability' (CCTV, 2007). Equally ironic was that Sanlu's 'New Generation Infant Formula' was even awarded the National Science and Technology Progress Award, a prominent award that for the first time was honoured to a dairy company. Numerous media reports and interviews with Sanlu's management were published. Moreover, the press release about an award that Sanlu won, '30 Years: Brands that Have Changed the Lives of Chinese', appeared on the People's Net and that piece was actually written and supplied by Sanlu itself (Wall Street Journal, 2008).

Readers might have noticed that media outlets with nationwide coverage, such as CCTV and the People's Net, were involved in the collusion. This was an indication of how powerful the influence of business interests was in that they even infiltrated the Party's most prominent mouthpiece. These two outlets relied much less on commercial earnings compared to local metropolitan papers, and were thought to be less susceptible to business influence, but unfortunately facts proved otherwise. More importantly, many Chinese people still regarded what the People's Daily or CCTV published as authoritative. This attitude might be especially relevant given that Sanlu was a budget segment leader, and that many of its customers lived in the countryside.

We have reiterated in previous chapters that popular opinion regarding the legitimacy of central and local governments did vary; the former was thought to be far more legitimate than the latter. To a lesser extent, this distinction in perception also existed regarding the relative credibility of central and local media. Although ordinary people might disregard what was said about politics in both central and local media, they nonetheless regarded information – such as outcomes of product quality tests – as useful guidance, in the belief that information given by central media should be more objective and impartial given the fact that central media represented the state. If true, the political fallout of the Sanlu scandal would be immense because many people who believed the instrumental usefulness of central media for everyday life would suspect the legitimacy of this mouthpiece, and ultimately that of the state, as the collusive relations between businesses and central media were too difficult to be ignored. As a result, people with such perceptions would start to question whether Party rule was based on client interests rather than the common good. Worse still, if people lost faith in state media, mass persuasion – which I pointed out in Chapter 3 as the most commonly-used means of social control to ensure the Party's legitimacy – would be less and less effective and thus shake the cornerstone of regime legitimacy in the long term.

As mentioned previously, the Sanlu scandal was worth investigating owing to the involvement of the corporate sector, which differed this case from SARS. When it came to discussing the collusion between Sanlu and Baidu, China's most used search engine, one should bear in mind that wide media censorship could have happened without direct state involvement⁸⁵. This new 'model' of collusion suggested that media censorship in authoritarian China was becoming more prevalent and decentralised.

⁸⁵ This was true at least in terms of ownership. Unlike state television and newspaper which were Party propaganda outlets, Baidu was a purely private company and was not situated within the propaganda apparatus.

Teller International, a public relations agent employed by Sanlu, reportedly advised Sanlu to pay ¥3 million to Baidu in order to ‘grasp the media discourse’. The proposal explained that ‘Baidu is a very important media [outlet] to buy off because its search engine is where consumers get information from ... currently Mengniu, Yili, Huiyuan⁸⁶ and other companies are enjoying Baidu’s “publicity protection”...Baidu has agreed that Sanlu can pay for ¥3 million worth of advertisements to enjoy the privilege of getting all negative news deleted at an early stage’ (Sina.com, 2008a). The proposal also revealed that Sanlu was already in ‘strong cooperation’ with Sina and Sohu, China’s most visited websites, in that neither website would publish any negative news concerning Sanlu until the end of 2008, except when state agencies released important news that might involve Sanlu (Sina.com, 2008a).

Baidu firmly denied the allegation that it accepted such a proposal, but it confirmed that its staff were contacted twice in this regard (Sina.com, 2008a). Although there was no concrete evidence suggesting Baidu had granted the so called ‘publicity protection’ status to Sanlu, the leaked proposal nevertheless uncovered the industry-wide deceptive practice behind which businesses often had a hand. It pointed out a concern that the Chinese people were increasingly subject to manipulation by both the state and the business, and had not enjoyed more freedom of information as a result of media and Internet commercialisation.

The explanation for this persistent deception lay in the fact that ‘There is a close connection between the government, private sector and media, with the Party’s interests dominating all three’ (An Alex and An David, 2008). Apparently, the state did not even issue a single directive to any of the websites concerned. However, this by no means suggested that the state was completely innocent. In fact, the much reduced empowerment

⁸⁶ They were all Sanlu’s competitors.

role of the Internet in China, i.e. the supposed but unrealised usefulness of the Internet to expose scandals such as the Sanlu one, should be precisely ascribed to the state policy.

First, although most of the popular websites in China were privately owned, the state regulated in detail and watched closely what should and should not appear. Key staff at each website were reportedly contacted frequently by various agencies in the propaganda apparatus in regard to what to delete, what (not) to highlight and what (not) to recommend to netizens. Lists of prohibited topics were dispatched on a routine basis. The aforementioned leaked document from a public relations agency also suggested that incidents such as the Sanlu scandal were among the taboo. The document read, 'In the period when the Olympics is held, negative news such as food scares are suppressed by the government. For Sanlu, this is a favourable opportunity ... Your company should seize this opportunity and seek cooperation with Baidu before this period ends' (Sina.com, 2008a). In other words, although filtering Sanlu's negative news violated the principle of transparency and impartiality, it conformed entirely to established state policies, an excuse often used by Internet companies operating in China when they were found to have assisted the government with repression⁸⁷. Given Baidu's track record of profiteering from deception⁸⁸, it was therefore reasonable to speculate that, if the scandal was made public any later, Baidu would have probably accepted the offer of ¥3 million and have implemented the censorship even without directives from above.

This gave rise to the second reason for the puzzle of the impeded empowerment of the Internet – namely, prevalent self-censorship deliberately induced by government policies. The government decided which major websites to support in terms of their willingness and contribution to filtering (so to some degree, state control of information

⁸⁷ For example, Yahoo argued that it had no choice but to cooperate, according to Chinese laws, with the Chinese government when it requested Yahoo to supply the passwords of email accounts of dissidents.

⁸⁸ For example, Baidu was previously exposed by CCTV for ranking websites in search results according to how much money each website paid, and for filtering those websites which refused to pay, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWPOAI7DT4M&feature=related>.

was ‘delegated’ to these websites) while paying little attention to their ethical business conduct. As a result, websites like Baidu which closely followed government guidance were supported, whereas websites like Google which claimed to ‘do no evil’ eventually had to withdraw their service from China (Yang, 2010). In other words, government policies served to eliminate competition, which allowed notorious but ‘obedient’ businesses such as Baidu to dominate. Moreover, the adverse effect of such discrimination went far beyond commerce, because over time all independent websites would be either forced out or blocked because of the Gresham's law, the so called ‘Bad money drives out good’⁸⁹, leaving no alternative source of information for Chinese netizens, and thus creating a digital gap on authentic information. Manipulated Internet commercialisation therefore did not work in the interests of the people since such commercialisation ultimately served Party interests rather than people’s concerns.

This lack of independent information explained why the Internet and media could not help consumers in China as much as consumers in liberal democracies. In the latter, it is common for interest groups and businesses to affect, control or even own media outlets; however, because of pluralism, which is a built-in feature of liberal democracies, it is impractical to buy off all the media, for example, for covering up a product safety issue. Media outlets not only perform checks and balances against the government and commercial interests, but also among each other. In this way, a relatively transparent and open public sphere as a whole is formed in terms of the availability of information, despite the fact that individual media outlets may not be objective or honest. In contrast, having said that in China Party interests dominate those of business and the media, it is easy for the business-controlled media to put a blanket ban on an issue such as product safety, especially when the Party also considers such issues sensitive. In this sense, media

⁸⁹ Examples included Google, Youtube, Facebook, Twitter and some famous blog providers.

commercialisation serves to worsen the situation of information asymmetry because the people are manipulated by state propaganda as well as business. They are even more deprived in terms of consumer protection and the right to know.

6.4.2 The Olympics and the Milk Scandal

What was argued above on Party interests dominated everything could be best demonstrated by its attitude towards the milk scandal during and in the run up to the Olympics. In the last chapter on the Sichuan earthquake, we mentioned that during this period, the foreign media were given more freedom to report, an open gesture made by the Chinese government in order to present itself as a confident state that followed international norms. However, this new rule did not apply to the Chinese media as much as to their foreign counterparts, as in China the management of domestic and foreign media was in fact separately administered (Brady, 2008), and control over domestic media was largely not bound by China's commitment to more media freedom. It made to the international community. Instead of being given more freedom, the micro-management of domestic media was actually intensified most of the time, except for a brief period in the initial aftermath of the earthquake.

Since 2006, Chinese domestic media were mobilised by the Party's propaganda apparatus in a concerted effort to play up the Olympics theme, a deliberate 'campaign of mass distraction' which was aimed at boosting morale and pride among the people while distracting their attention away from various ongoing political, economic and social problems (Brady, 2009:1). Media outlets were instructed to downplay stories that were deemed potentially disruptive to a perfect Olympics, and in an editorial guidance allegedly dispatched by the propaganda department, the issue of food safety was listed as one of the

taboos (Sydney Morning Herald, 2008). With this media control at work, the Sanlu scandal was undoubtedly suppressed. Sanlu, as well as those government agencies responsible for the tragedy, seemed to have profited from this propaganda ban on bad news during the Olympics (Brady, 2009). The ban allowed both Sanlu and the local government in Shijiazhuang about six months to manoeuvre behind the scenes without causing trouble to the country's mega showcasing; in the words of Helen Clark, the Prime Minister of New Zealand '[They were] to try and put a towel over it and deal with it without an official recall' (Forbes, 2008).

There was one attempt to expose the scandal before the central government formally stepped in but it was suppressed because of the upcoming Olympics. In July, the Guangdong-based Southern Weekly 'secretly' investigated cases of babies falling ill after drinking Sanlu milk in Wuhan, but it was unable to publish the report owing to enormous pressure from the government which asked the media only to report positive news. There was not much that journalists could do apart from 'tell parents around who have babies not to feed them with Sanlu' (Fu, 2009). When the Olympics closed and before Sanlu admitted its guilt, there were a number of reports that established links between questionable milk and sick babies, but none of them dared to name Sanlu as the principal culprit, because of its powerful commercial influence and political clout (Fu, 2009).

Even after the case was thoroughly exposed, the Party's inclination to preserve its image still impeded the media from further investigating the issue in the fear that media efforts to speak for the parents might form an alternative, grassroots discourse that would challenge the official one propagated by the state. Non-state media were told not to publish their own stories but to carry only Xinhua's news releases⁹⁰, while state media deliberately tried to downplay it (they looked very embarrassed because they now had to rebuke the

⁹⁰ It was a common practice that media outlets were only allowed to carry Xinhua's release after major incidents.

business to which they had offered unconditional support just months previously). State media soon moved on to promoting the theme of China's first space walk that was about to be staged⁹¹, another mass distraction campaign which they hoped would add extra flame to the Olympics pride and elicit support for the regime. After all this was completed, apart from official updates on the number of victims, and later the bankruptcy and sale of Sanlu, nothing else appeared in Chinese media. The incident soon faded from public discussion.

6.5 The Political Utility of the Milk Scandal

The leadership response to the crisis was prompt after the New Zealand government alerted Beijing directly through diplomatic channels, which made the scandal no longer concealable. The reaction was still a combination of three strategies: the centralisation of power, a paradigm shift, and reconnecting with the people, which conformed nicely to our generic model. However, instead of deliberately making use of the crisis politically, crisis management this time was clearly more focused on problem solving. Unlike SARS and the earthquake where external threats existed and against which mass mobilisation could be launched, the milk scandal arose entirely from internal failures of the system. In other words, the system itself might well become the target if crisis mobilisation was conducted without constraints. Unsurprisingly, as we shall see, the response to the milk scandal was a rather passive mode of crisis management, whereas for SARS and the earthquake a more active mode of crisis management was used. Put simply, because the milk scandal was so disgraceful, this time the leadership wanted to get away from this crisis as quickly as possible, and so the task of deriving political utility from it was rendered secondary.

⁹¹Ironically again, Sanlu was designated the official dairy supplier of China's space programme.

6.5.1 The Centralisation of Power

Sanlu's sudden change of attitude since early September might have been indicative that the central government was taking over the decentralised governance of product safety from local governments. A centralisation of medical and political resources was under way. On the evening of 11 September, when a State Council investigation team had been sent to Shijiazhuang the same day, Sanlu admitted that some of their products were contaminated by melamine and the company would recall all of them (Caijing, 2008).

On 13 September, the State Council initiated a concerted effort of bringing together all agencies charged with food safety responsibilities. As was the case with previous major crises, a LSG was established to resolve the milk crisis. The MOH was designated to chair this group, which included GAQSIQ, the General Administration of Industry and Commerce, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Public Security, the State Food and Drug Administration and the Hebei provincial government (Xinhua, 2008i). As a result of this power centralisation, information processing, decision making and implementation became more efficient because of better coordination and the central government was more capable of tackling the milk crisis, at least organisationally.

Additionally, a series of institutional arrangements were made to centralise the state crisis management capacity. According to the Major National Food Safety Incident Contingency Plan enacted in 2006, a Class I (highest class, meaning 'very serious incident') response was launched (Xinhua, 2008x). Apart from the aforementioned central government LSG, every locality that had a significant number of tainted milk victims also set up a crisis management command centre as required by the Contingency Plan (AFP, 2008a).

Meanwhile, GAQSIQ, the principal food quality regulating agency, was also centralising food quality control. It launched a nationwide milk quality check that covered not only milk processing but also raw milk collection. As mentioned in the introduction, most national brands were found to have produced melamine-contaminated milk. In face of this industry-wide crisis, GAQSIQ ordered producers to recall and destroy all tainted milk, and it supervised the removal of over 7,000 tonnes of contaminated milk products from shops nationwide in just two weeks (Bloomberg, 2008). It also mobilised its personnel and sent them to individual factories, supervising the whole production chain and ‘inspect every batch rigorously before they leave the factory’ (Xinhua, 2008i). As many as 150,000 officials were mobilised, who inspected 98 dairy producers and farms, banned 151 illegal companies and caught three producers that produced melamine-contaminated animal feed (People’s Net, 2008b).

The scandal was so serious that it caused humiliating damage to the government’s credibility. The government had to make a decisive gesture to restore its reputation and show enough state autonomy to punish those responsible. That was where the organisational and disciplinary shake up came in.

As discussed earlier, a limited accountability system was established largely as a result of the SARS crisis in 2003 – when two ministerial ranking officials were removed from office, and with a more recent precedent in 2007, when the founding director of the State Food and Drug Administration, Zheng Xiaoyu, was executed for granting approval to unsafe medicines that resulted in several deaths (BBC, 2007), when it came to the milk scandal the scale of the clean house was no smaller. As soon as the scandal broke out, the vice mayor of Shijiazhuang who was managing food and agriculture, along with several other local officials in charge of food safety, were fired due to dereliction of duty (Xinhua, 2008ab). As the investigation went on, the mayor of Shijiazhuang was also removed for

not reporting the incident according to established procedures and failing to activate food safety contingency plans in a timely fashion (Xinhua, 2009b). A clean house was also made in Sanlu: Tian Wenhua, the company's chairwoman, was stripped of both her Party and functional posts and later received a life sentence (Xinhua, 2009c).

The 'accountability storm' swept through more senior cadres when the State Council released its initial findings on the scandal. Li Changjiang, director of GAQSIQ and a ministerial ranking official, was forced to resign owing to GAQSIQ's lack of supervision of the dairy industry (People's Daily, 2008b). It was during Li's tenure that GAQSIQ initiated the highly controversial 'exempt from inspection' policy which resulted in the chaotic order of the dairy industry; he was therefore deemed responsible. At the same time, Wu Xianguo, an alternative member of the CCP's Central Committee, was also removed from his post as the Party chief of Shijiazhuang, for not reporting and for mishandling the crisis (People's Daily, 2008b).

Despite these high profile cases of punishment, however, the intra-Party accountability system and the way decisions were made were far from transparent since punishment measures varied considerably across similar incidents. For example, in a Shanxi mudslide which happened right after the milk scandal and killed more than 200 people, the provincial governor of Shanxi, Meng Xuenong⁹², was forced to resign (Xinhua, 2008ae). Previously, in April 2008, a train crash occurred in Shandong that claimed more than 70 lives. The Railway Minister Liu Zhijun received an administrative demerit from the State Council (Gov.cn, 2009b). In light of these precedents, the governor of Hebei province, Hu Chunhua, who was reportedly close to Hu Jintao, luckily remained intact and was even promoted to become Party chief of Inner Mongolia in 2009. These differences inevitably raised questions about the impartiality of the Party's accountability system.

⁹² This was the second time that he took the blame for incidents occurred within his jurisdiction and was forced to resign. The first time was in 2003 when he resigned from his post as mayor of Beijing, for misreporting the severity of SARS.

6.5.2 Shifting the Dominating Paradigm

As the CCP's conventional crisis management proceeded, the disciplining and shaking up of the entire system was then accompanied by a paradigm shift. And by implication, the Party-state invited the people to identify all faults with the old paradigm as well as with those sacked officials. As such, the central government was in desperate need to show its concern for the safety of the people and to be seen by them as making a difference to the current governing structure and practice, not specifically to the dairy industry, but to food safety at large.

The State Council launched an overhaul of the food safety regime. The policy of inspection exemption for food, to which a scandal on this scale was mostly ascribed, was abolished altogether. Food producers which were granted such privileges before were told not to cite them again to avoid misleading consumers further (Xinhua, 2008aa). In addition, the government promised to set up nearly 400 product testing centres within the next two years, of which 80 would be food testing centres with the latest equipment. Market intervention in favour of dairy farmers was also implemented to lower the cost of feeding cows (AFP, 2008a).

Despite the immediate remedy, the central government also made considerable efforts to redress the food governing system in a more fundamental way so as to ensure lasting effects. As for the governing structure, the State Council established a Food Safety Commission in 2010, headed by the Deputy Premier Li Keqiang and included three out of four Vice Premiers, as well as 15 ministers from relevant departments (Xinhua, 2010d). The creation of this high-ranking commission was an attempt to make food safety a more pressing issue on the state agenda, and to normalise the concerted effort and stringent measures during the September 2008 high profile crackdown on food contamination.

Nonetheless, it was still uncertain how effective this overarching commission would be owing to its status as a deliberation and coordination body under the State Council, as opposed to a discrete and independent agency in its own right. Its strength lay in the political authority to bring together all relevant departments when facing a crisis, whereas its weakness lay in the fact that it did not have many resources at its disposal, but still had to rely upon the ministries for day to day supervision. In other words, this new commission might be adept at resolving food crises because of its centralising capacity, but much less so in preventing a crisis from (re)occurring.

Like learning from crisis in SARS, legal revisions were also made after the milk scandal. The milk scandal highlighted the fragmentation and loopholes in the legal framework and apparently accelerated the finalisation of the Food Safety Law. The draft of this law had been under consultation as early as December 2007, but the milk scandal in 2008 provided fresh examples of what needed to be avoided, and therefore provided a lot of useful input in the draft revisions (CRI, 2009).

Many argued that one of the reasons for the widespread violation in food safety was because the punishment was too minor compared to the human cost (Chen, 2009). As a result, despite its merits in merging and updating China's previously overlapping laws on food safety, the Food Safety Law significantly raised the level of fines for food safety-related offences, from previously one to five times of the illegal gain, to up to ten times of the goods' value (Gov.cn, 2009a). For violations that were deemed criminal offences, the People's Supreme Court issued a directive ordering subordinating courts to punish violators using harsher sentences (according to the law), including the death penalty. For major food safety incidents, the directive stipulated that all those responsible should be punished 'harsher and quicker' (Xinhua, 2011b).

The paradigm shift also included a shift towards more modern technical standards in order to assure consumers. Some of these were the direct results of learning from developed countries. One month after the scandal, GAQSIQ swiftly issued a new national standard of testing melamine contamination after consulting the standards of the US FDA (Food and Drug Administration) and the FCC (Food Chemicals Codex) (Gov.cn, 2008c). Accordingly, the MOH and the other four agencies issued a new national standard limiting the maximum permitted level of melamine to 1mg/kg for baby formula and 2.5 mg/kg for other dairy products, which was as stringent as the standard in the US (Wishnick, 2009). The milk scandal also acted as a catalyst for the state to overhaul systematically its food standard more generally. According to the MOH, a comprehensive food standard review (including food additives) should be completed by 2015 through updating and combining (abolishing) existing standards in effect at different levels (national, local and industrial) that were often overlapping and conflicting.

6.5.3 Reconnecting with the People

As we have seen in SARS and the earthquake, the CCP normally seeks to manipulate the opportunity offered by a crisis to bolster its popular support. It has been doing so by exploiting the vulnerability people face and casting itself in the most favourable light. This proven strategy serves two purposes. One is to cultivate a popular sense of dependency upon the state in an unfortunate situation and to respond to such a sense by constructing itself as the people's saviour. The other is to seize such opportunities to demonstrate to the people that it is a benevolent, accessible and people-serving Party, rather than an apathetic bureaucracy as perceived by the people under normal circumstances.

However, as far as the milk scandal was concerned, this political utility of reconnecting with the people faced severe impediments to its full utilisation owing to the nature of this crisis. As argued above, the milk scandal originated purely from the systematic failures within the system. Its endogenous origins effectively prevented the Party from manipulating such an incident as an external threat, without which the saviour myth could not be validated⁹³. The first purpose – constructing a saviour image – was thus difficult to fulfil because rather than acting in time to prevent the crisis, the Party actually came ‘too late’ in that it only responded after its own neglect had evolved into a disaster⁹⁴. The second purpose – showing benevolence – could still be fulfilled partially, but doing so in this underlying context made the Party look as if it was begging for forgiveness, instead of convincing the people of its benevolent rule.

No matter how awkward this was, the Party needed to take some actions to stop the tarnishing of its moral authority. The State Council ordered on 13 September that all children affected would receive free check-ups and medical treatment (Xinhua, 2008i). Children affected were also insured by the state for a period of 20 years (Xinhua, 2010c).

On the public relations level, Wen Jiabao offered a formal apology during his visit to the Beijing Children’s Hospital and acknowledged that poor government supervision was partly responsible. ‘We are very sad, though our people are very understanding. But as a government, we feel very guilty’. He also accused responsible companies, in a more severe tone, for their ‘conscienceless’ actions (Xinhua, 2008o). Hu Jintao also made a less apologetic, but harshly worded remark. In a meeting with officials ranked at ministerial level and above, he condemned some cadres for ‘turning a deaf ear to people’s appeal and

⁹³ From this perspective, it was easy to understand why the government desperately sought to construct the milk scandal as a crisis where factors external to the political system were mainly responsible. The high-profile arrests and trials of a dozen of dairy farmers and dealers were the demonstrations of this tactics, even though these were far from convincing.

⁹⁴ The phrase ‘I came too late’ was used by Wen Jiabao on several occasions where incidents were largely caused by the government’s own neglect, such as after coal mine explosions and a train collision.

suffering, and being apathetic to serious issues such as food safety that concern the wellbeing of the people' (Xinhua, 2008ac).

These compensating measures – the official apology and harsh remarks – might have a limited effect on pacifying popular anger, but they at best contained any further decline in Party legitimacy in the short term. Although during the crisis state media as usual operated in full capacity to publicise leadership activities that conveyed the 'warmth of the Party' to the people, in the aftermath the Party found it too frustrating to give a convincing explanation that its rightful and decisive intervention addressed nothing but its own wrongdoings, let alone other associated negative political implications. Imaginably, it was inclined to hide away from and muddle through the situation. As evidence of its deliberate motive to play down the issue, very unusually, it did not arrange an award assembly to praise those model cadres in the fight against the crisis. It simply wanted the people gradually to forget it because this crisis was almost wholly negative to the Party, and one which could not be used to the Party's advantage as an opportunity to reassert itself actively.

The mode of mobilisation used also determined the defensive characteristic (from the Party's perspective) of managing this crisis. Reconnecting with the people after the milk scandal came entirely in the top-down manner, and the old paradigm of paternalism returned; although masked with modern public relations techniques that emphasised benevolence, in essence people were again treated as mere subjects and excluded from the political process. We might have noticed that, unlike in SARS and the earthquake, people were neither mobilised nor invited to participate in the 'struggle' to contain the milk crisis, and that only government personnel were mobilised. This selective mobilisation was natural because grassroots participation in such a context could only enhance the popular conviction about government faults and would only serve to undermine the Party-state. But

without popular participation, mobilisation legitimacy - the source of legitimacy to which the Party usually appealed – could not be tapped.

Finally, China's unique demographics mattered, which made the milk crisis much more than a food scare, but an issue of regime legitimacy. Because of the One Child Policy, the child was usually the most important centre of attention in a Chinese family and Chinese parents invested a great deal of hope and money into the wellbeing of their single child. The hurt caused by the milk scandal would not be easily forgotten, let alone worries about future side-effects to their children caused by the poisoning. Monetary compensation and superficial benevolence were simply not enough to avoid damage to the Party's legitimacy.

6.6 The Milk Scandal and State-society Relations

The section above explained precisely the reason why the government discouraged popular participation in the milk scandal. The harsh way the government treated civil society and organised grassroots initiatives analysed below further validated the idea that the government viewed mobilisation against its own internal cracks as threatening. In other words, it did not have a genuine interest in reconnecting with the people in a way that might potentially destabilise the status quo. It well reflected the Party's losing confidence in that it wanted to put a firewall between grassroots initiatives and its own closed-door handling of the aftermath – all in the name of preserving stability.

The milk scandal was an extraordinary event that put regime resilience to the test. In this regard, whether people were allowed to move their appeals forward through rightful resistance, and in particular how far they could actually get with the help of legal means, showed whether the Party-state was really committed to the rule by law. Further, the milk

scandal could have been a good example showcasing an improving standard of rule by law in China, because most of those responsible were not even part of the system. For example, the parents of sickened children were merely seeking to bring those unscrupulous companies to justice through legal means. These were just civil lawsuits⁹⁵. In this respect, the state should have had some confidence precisely because parents were not directly accusing the state, and their actions were merely interest articulation within the contour of established institutions rather than challenges to the system.

However, as manifested in the suppression of the post-earthquake protests, the aftermath of the milk scandal was also overwhelmed by tightened social control, the momentum of which tended to quell any resistance regardless of its nature. The tightened control was characterised by the frequent use of extra-judicial measures as a substitute for, and at the expense of, rule by law.

These restrictive measures could be attributed to a changing discourse in the relationship between rule by law and Party interests. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the new principle that judiciary work must adhere to, the ‘three utmost priorities’, explicitly highlighted the Party’s cause as the top priority and downgraded rule by law to an instrument serving the Party’s cause. This latest change in discourse further weakened judiciary independence and justified Party interference in judiciary work in various ways. For example, in the milk scandal, the Party took over the judiciary and handled every detail directly with the disadvantaged. On the other hand, the judiciary process could not begin unless explicit Party permission was given.

Given this background, it was not surprising that the government impeded the legal proceeding of lawsuits against Sanlu. There were several attempts by parents to file class

⁹⁵ There were criminal suits against unscrupulous individuals shortly after the scandal broke out, but these were initiated by the state and not by the parents. Although these criminals were all sentenced according to the law, the role of the judiciary was less ‘intermediary’ because the lawsuits were not initiated from below and from the disadvantaged.

actions, but as of April 2009, none of these was accepted by the courts (Southern Weekly, 2009c). Moreover, lawyers who had already accepted these cases, including more than 100 lawyers who signed up to offer pro bono legal advice, were discouraged or even threatened not to help the parents. Local officials and the Party-controlled Lawyers' Association reportedly told lawyers involved that the government had its own plan to deal with this and lawyers should 'observe the overall situation and preserve stability'. Those who did get involved would face punishment that was 'not just losing the job' (New York Times, 2008b; Takungpao, 2008).

The government also suppressed other forms of collective action. It shut a website called 'Home for the Kidney Stone Babies' which called for parents to act together to defend their rights and facilitate the exchange of medical information. A rights activist and the owner of the site, Zhao Lianhai, whose child also fell ill, was sentenced to two-and-a-half years. He was jailed because of organising collective petitions among parents who were dissatisfied with the government's compensation plans, and for attempting to organise a news conference in order to garner support from the public (New York Times, 2009a). Although he was later released on medical parole, the unusually harsh sentence indicated the defensive mentality of the government which was hyper-sensitive to any organised resistance, rightful or otherwise.

Nonetheless, the Chinese government seemed to be less sensitive about individual lawsuits than about the abovementioned group appeals, because the latter tended to be viewed as threatening the regime. In March 2009, Shen Deyong, Vice President of the Supreme People's Court, said during an online engagement with netizens that 'The People's Court is well prepared and is ready to accept compensation lawsuits at any time according to the law' (Southern Weekly, 2009c). Subsequently, a handful of individual lawsuits were accepted by the courts in several provinces. These cases did move forward,

but the fact that they could not go ahead until senior officials gave the green light revealed that Party influence was the powerful determinant of judicial affairs. The fact that not all individual lawsuits were accepted gave rise to speculation that the sensitivity of each lawsuit was evaluated on a case-by-case basis, rather than universally. It revealed that rule by law was still heavily interfered with by administrative measures.

The bad news was that, although a small number of lawsuits had been accepted by the courts Sanlu's bankruptcy proceedings had ended before the compensation lawsuits were heard in court (Southern Weekly, 2009c). This meant that even if the parents had won the cases, they were unlikely to get any compensation from Sanlu as the company had been deregistered.

In the end, no parents were able to bring Sanlu to justice through legal means. Therefore, the responsibility of making all compensation arrangements had to be shouldered by the government alone. It did make a closed-door, concerted effort to pacify the affected, but purely through top-down administrative means with no bottom-up societal intermediation involved. The State Council's taskforce on handling the milk crisis instructed and coordinated 22 companies implicated in the scandal to set up a medical compensation fund totalling ¥1.1 billion, and emphasised that the allocation of such funds was a political mission. Families that lost their children received ¥200,000, ¥30,000 for children with serious illnesses and as little as ¥2,000 for children with moderate symptoms (China Radio Network, 2009).

Ironically, the fund implied more utility than financial compensation – it was used by the government as an administrative measure to replace the legal process so as to avoid what would have been 'the largest scale of compensation claims since the founding of the PRC' (Takungpao, 2008). The condition attached to being eligible for the fund was that parents agreed not to sue upon receiving the fund (New York Times, 2009b). Even worse,

with collective actions clamped down upon, individual parents were left with little bargaining power vis-à-vis the government and large companies. The routine strategy of divide and rule prevailed again, and the compensation plan eventually turned into a forcible deal – those parents who rejected the compensation plan and still opted for resolutions through legal means would see their child's name not included in the 'official' list of victims, and these children would not be eligible for any free medical treatment in the future if more problems arose before they were 18 (China Radio Network, 2009). Unsurprisingly, most parents eventually accepted the plan.

Apparently, the government preserved stability as the issue soon faded from public attention. In essence, the rash and discursive way the government suppressed intra-institutional resistance had serious legitimacy implications. First, the approach of offering economic incentives to turn people away from seeking legal resolutions, or 'spend money to buy stability', 'resolving people (*renmin*)'s problem by using *renminbi*', was not financially sustainable (Xinhua, 2009f). Facing a soaring bill for preserving stability, the government would eventually be overloaded with this spending⁹⁶. Second, offering compensations and future healthcare in exchange for parents' rights to sue were detrimental to the moral authority of the regime. At best, it was buying stability; at worst, it amounted to kidnapping the already miserable victims and their families. Finally, Party interference with and restrictions on the judiciary – an important safety valve for social tension – would eventually channel discontent directly against the Party-state, turning sporadic resistance against elements of the system into aggression against the system as a whole. 'The denial of the use of rightful resistance can reveal when members of powerful

⁹⁶ According to Human Rights Watch, China's spending on maintaining internal stability exceeded its defence expenditure in 2011. Lots of money has been used to strengthen coercion – recruiting more security personnel and buying more surveillance equipments, but a considerable proportion of the money has been spent to pacify discontent.

groups have dared to take liberties with the symbols in which they are most invested' (Scott, 1990:106, cited in O'Brien, 1996).

6.7 International Impact and Domestic Repercussions

The last section concerns the impact of the milk scandal on China's image at home and abroad. When talking about the international dimension, the emphasis is on change in the external perceptions of China and the nature of its rapid rise; when speaking from a domestic perspective, the emphasis is placed on regime legitimacy.

6.7.1 International Impact

In developed countries and particularly the EU and the US, the milk scandal seriously tarnished the reputation of 'Made in China'. Although the EU and especially the US had not imported Chinese milk products in large quantities before the milk scandal because they had much higher safety standards for dairy products, the indirect economic losses involved were enormous. For example, the EU banned imports of baby food that used Chinese milk as an ingredient and subsequently ordered all food imports containing more than 15% milk powder to be tested as a precautionary measure (USA Today, 2008).

While in the EU and the US the seizing of melamine-contaminated Chinese made food seemed to be sporadic, traces of melamine widely affected the operations of American and European giant food producers in China. As a result of China's deep integration in the global production chain, Chinese milk had been used as an important ingredient in many dairy and confectionary products prior to the scandal. This was where much greater risk lay because it originated from multiple sources and was hard to trace. As

of late 2008, Cadbury, Heinz, Nestlé, Starbucks and Unilever, among others, had found that their products contained Chinese contaminated milk (Dani and Deep, 2010). Some of these contaminated products were sold outside China (especially in the Asia-Pacific region) in large quantities which caused another wave of panic in these countries.

Whilst the milk scandal was not the only food scare caused by China that had troubled international consumer⁹⁷, no single incident in the past could be comparable with the milk scandal of 2008 in terms of economic losses and reputational damage. Besides the fortune spent by major international food companies on their product recalls, this scandal was different from most previous cases where the major problem was excessive residues of veterinary medical products (Yang and Jiang, 2009). The melamine scandal was particularly deplorable because the adding of toxic chemicals into babies' milk was deliberate. Coincidentally, this scandal broke out shortly after a highly successful and perfectly organised Beijing Olympics (in the name of which the milk scandal had been covered up before the Games finished). The two events casted the Chinese state in a totally different light: the monolithic, strong and centralised Chinese state, that managed to stage a spectacular Olympics before the world, could not ensure even the basic safety standards of milk for the consumption of its domestic population. To the West, this feature of Chinese state power was very contradictory, and how this power would be used and for what intention remained equally opaque. Since the milk scandal, the West may well be more convinced that China politicised the Olympics⁹⁸ in a nationally concerted effort simply to win international prestige, but at the same time took little care of its own people's living conditions. This conviction was very detrimental to China's soft power.

⁹⁷ For example, melamine-laced pet food ingredients exported to the US, numerous notifications made concerning hazardous food from China via the RASFF (the EU's Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed), poisoned dumplings exported to Japan, etc.

⁹⁸ A position that China repeatedly denied.

In addition, in recent years China has made big investments in the West to improve its image through soft power projections. In serving its purpose of presenting a friendly China, which it asserted that the West had misunderstood previously, it first established many Confucius Institutes and organised cultural fairs that promoted its cultural attractiveness, and more recently started to broadcast directly to the western audience using the international channels of its media, attempting to convince the West of the uniqueness and superiority of China's economic and political systems. However, soft power projections like this could be convincing only if domestic institutions were sustainable, because more often than not, a good external image was endogenous to, and an extension of, good institutions at home. After the milk scandal unfolded as a systematic crisis, these attempts seemed strikingly ironic because of the sharp contrast between the promoted superficial image abroad, and the harsh reality at home. It not only weakened the positive impact (if any) that this charm offensive might have had, but also significantly damaged the explanatory power of the Chinese model because the unscrupulous scandal, a product of China's dysfunctioning and crony political economy, only served to prove that the so called Chinese model lacked institutional viability or even moral foundations.

The consequences of the suspicion of China's soft power, and the falsification of the Chinese model, were more evident in developing countries. Although the notion of the Chinese model actually first originated in the West, where the majority of the debate about it took place, the Chinese model was widely perceived as a potential challenge to the western liberal order. The topic was hotly debated, not because the West wanted to adopt it, but because the West wanted to determine how to cope with the challenge it might bring about. The genuine interest in the Chinese model or in learning from the Chinese experience was actually found in underdeveloped regions of the world, especially Africa (Sautman and Yan, 2007). However, when the milk scandal broke out in China, most

countries that implemented blanket bans on Chinese dairy products were in Asia and Africa, including Brunei, Ghana, Nepal, Tanzania, Togo etc. (Reuters, 2008b). The scandal might have prompted elites in the developing world to have second thoughts about the Chinese model and about learning from the Chinese governance experience.

Basically, the international community implemented another ‘quarantine China’, as it did in 2003 after the SARS outbreak. Hence, while the rest of the world was debating the threats, experiences or opportunities a monolithic, strong and centralised Chinese state might bring, the same Chinese state – but with fragmented, weak and decentralised characteristics – haunted many countries, developed and developing alike. ‘Ironically, it is China's weakness, and not its strength, that will pose the greater challenge to other countries’ (Wishnick, 2009:220).

6.7.2 The Impact on Greater China

The scandal also had an adverse impact on the Greater China region. In Taiwan, the milk scandal triggered a political storm as contaminated milk powder was found on the island just a few months after Mainland China and Taiwan resumed de facto government-to-government negotiations which had been suspended for a decade. Most of the melamine-laced milk powder entered Taiwan as a food ingredient and affected a host of products, causing public panic and resentment against the mainland. The newly elected Beijing-friendly KMT government initially exercised restraint to avoid criticising the mainland, but pro-independence political parties on the island utilised this crisis and framed it in ‘unification or independence’ terms by fiercely attacking the KMT government for its weakness towards the mainland. Lin Fang-yue, then Taiwanese Health Minister who had been in his position for only four months, had to resign over his decision to loosen the

standards for testing melamine from zero tolerance to a maximum of 2.5 ppm (China Post, 2008). The political storm peaked when pro-independence parties staged a massive anti-China demonstration, joined by tens of thousands of protesters who were worried that more unsafe food and other products would enter the island if Taiwan became more dependent economically on the mainland (AFP, 2008b). Overall, the milk scandal overshadowed the improved cross strait relations and reinforced the negative impression of Mainland China among Taiwanese citizens whose hearts and minds Mainland China was desperately trying to win. The food scare was to some extent even more damaging to Mainland China's image than more political issues such as the mainland's missiles targeting Taiwan, because it was such a sensitive livelihood issue concerning a much wider population, including those who might not be interested in cross strait politics.

Although the Association for Relations across the Taiwan Straits, mainland's quasi-governmental Taiwan affairs department, issued an apology to all Taiwanese consumers and affected food producers (VOA, 2008a), this negative perception of China may have become a hurdle that Beijing-friendly Taiwanese politicians had to consider when seeking further reconciliation with the mainland.

In Hong Kong, and to a lesser extent, Macau, the milk scandal severely affected the image of Mainland China. While the panic it caused to Taiwan was largely one-off, the problem it caused to China's two SARs (Special Administrative Regions) is prolonged and has lasted through to the present day. Mainland parents lost confidence completely in domestic brands, and after foreign brands raised prices following the milk scandal, they rushed to Hong Kong and Macau to buy cheaper and safer imported milk powder and other baby food. With the ease of travel from the mainland to Hong Kong, the sudden surge in milk powder demand could hardly be coped with by Hong Kong retailers, even if they temporarily imposed a limit on how many cans of powder each shopper could buy (Wall

Street Journal, 2011). The shortage of baby milk in Hong Kong caused difficulties for local parents to secure milk powder for their babies and led to societal resentment against cross-border shoppers. More broadly, the competition for milk powder is regarded by the Hong Kong society as a typical illustration of how Mainland China ‘exported’ its problems to the territory and ‘poisoned’ Hong Kong’s values and order. The anti-mainland sentiment in Hong Kong that started to gain momentum in recent years was fuelled by the ongoing milk powder problem. Surveys show that a separate ‘Hongkongese’ identity is taking shape more rapidly among the public, whereas those that identify themselves as ‘Chinese’ have reached a record low (People’s Net, 2012b), especially among the younger generation. The Hongkongese identity is increasingly popular because people who share it believe that the One Country, Two Systems institution is under threat by the mainland (not just the central government but also the mainland *nouveau riche*). The mainland’s influence over Hong Kong is becoming increasingly powerful in that values and phenomena that are typical of the transitional China – such as huge inequality and panic buying – are penetrating Hong Kong to the extent that Hong Kong is being ‘mainlandised’. Since the milk scandal, young people have frequently expressed their resentment against the mainland on topics such as opposing the construction of high speed railway links between Hong Kong and the mainland, as well as complaining about rising housing prices which they believe to be pushed up by mainland buyers, and more recently, protesting directly against mainland travellers (Wall Street Journal, 2012). Some of this discontent was even aired in the form of social movements.

6.7.3 Domestic Repercussions

In terms of the political impact of the milk scandal, the domestic repercussions were even worse, as it affected Party legitimacy very negatively when it was found that the Chinese government had applied double standards when it came to addressing the international and domestic consequences of the crisis.

Since the embarrassing experience of international isolation, such as during SARS, the Chinese government has become more receptive to international pressure. This is not just to assure the world of its peaceful rise per se, but is a calculated move to maintain stable political and economic relations with the international community from where China gets resources to fuel its continued growth, and upon which domestic regime stability is hinged (Breslin, 2010). It is therefore becoming increasingly considerate in managing domestic incidents that might have a global impact. Particularly in the realm of NTS or human security where threats transcend borders, such as public health, China is more willing to adopt a cooperative approach to demonstrate its commitment to being a responsible great power.

Bearing this in mind, it was not surprising that as soon as the government of New Zealand informed Beijing and the crisis became international, the Chinese government took drastic actions to tackle it. It also reported the crisis to the WHO on the same day as the State Council knew about it (Caijing, 2008).

As the Paralympics was still going on and Beijing was still receiving a lot of coverage from international media, China tried very hard to pacify the international community, including many sports teams that were still in China. The government promised that all food, including dairy products supplied for the Olympics and the Paralympics, were ‘under scrutiny during the whole process, from production, transportation, to kitchens’, and no melamine was found in these products (Xinhua, 2008y).

This statement might have given some assurances to the international community. However, to the Chinese people, it did not come at the right time – millions of children in China were suffering from toxic milk produced by the same companies which took special quality management measures for Olympics supplies, but did little to ensure food safety for Chinese consumers. The popular anger was not so much against these companies as against the Chinese government – the same government that paid close attention to every detail of the food supply for mega state projects and foreigners, but took a laissez-faire approach to governing food quality for its own people. Later, a State Council white paper, *China's Food Quality and Food Safety Situation*, published in 2007, gained popular attention. The paper said that in the domestic food market, the pass rate in random inspections rose from 77.9% in 2006 to 85.1% in the first half of 2007, but the pass rate of food for export had been above 99% for many years and, according to Japanese official statistics, Chinese food produced for the Japanese market was even safer than those from the EU and the US (Gov.cn, 2007a). Such a white paper only provided more evidence to validate the popular conviction that the government cared how other countries viewed it more than it cared about the wellbeing of its own people.

In fact, it was just the latest example of the Chinese government applying double standards to the same issue purposefully trying to 'please' the outside world whilst treating its own people as second-class citizens. Other examples included subsidising Confucius Institutes around the world whilst thousands of Chinese teenagers still could not afford schooling, or writing off billions of African debts whilst millions of Chinese were still struggling on the poverty line.

These double standards that discriminated against Chinese people in their home country did not only occur in social and economic terms, but also in the crucial dimension of the right to information. In order to appear to have followed the Olympics convention

for open information and especially after the Tibet riot in March 2008, which it handled poorly, the Chinese government apparently took measures to increase information transparency, especially during times of crisis. However, this increased transparency seemed to be targeting an international audience only. The state news agency, Xinhua, either released more detailed reports in English than in Chinese, or released an English version only⁹⁹. The Global Times, a pro-nationalist tabloid run by the People's Daily, published a Chinese and an English version of the newspaper that looked as if they were two totally different newspapers. The Chinese version tried to avoid all taboos whereas the English version carried discussion on a host of sensitive topics, including on Tiananmen just before the event's twentieth anniversary¹⁰⁰. Chinese people joked that in the past one learnt English in order to 'understand the world' better, but nowadays one learns English in order to 'understand the home country' better.

Taken together, these instances of double standards falsified the Party rhetoric of 'serving the people' and 'putting people first'. It looked as if the Chinese government was more accountable to other countries than to its own people, and that it was not taking its domestic obligations and promises as seriously as its international commitments.

Even worse, about the same time that the milk crisis swept through China, news emerged suggesting that within the double standards where the Chinese government treated international and domestic audience differently, there was a 'double' double standards that discriminated against ordinary Chinese citizens but benefited the Chinese leadership. A widely circulated Internet post about the State Council Party and State Organisations Special Food Supply Centre revealed that the Chinese leadership and their families were completely insulated from unsafe food because they ate superior quality food

⁹⁹ For example, compare Xinhua's news releases in English and Chinese on a terrorist attack occurred in Kashgar, Xinjiang. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-08/04/content_8953646.htm and http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2008-08/04/content_8942060.htm

¹⁰⁰ See <http://www.globaltimes.cn/special/2009-06/434373.html>

that was specially grown and sourced using the strictest standards (China Digital Times, 2008). The Chinese government quickly responded that there was no such unit called the Special Food Supply Centre, saying that the news was simply rumours (Chinanews.com, 2008). But the one sentence statement was extremely weak because it neither explained what the truth was, nor denied the fact that top leaders ate specially supplied food.

In fact, the practice of ‘special supply’ dates back to the Mao era, and is not limited to food. However, at that time only a handful of leaders were entitled to such privilege. The existence of the special supply is an open secret in China. What makes the people angry is that nowadays food for the ordinary Chinese population is much more unsafe than in the Mao era, but the circle of officials entitled to the special supply is greatly expanded. Even some provincial functional departments have their own special supply centres (Southern Weekly, 2011). The proliferation of these centres is clearly characteristic of a leviathan state that enriches itself rather than serving public interests. It worsened the already widely perceived inequality between those inside and outside the Party-state system and deepened the cleavage between state and society. The milk scandal happened to amplify this division and it was perhaps the greatest erosion in social cohesion and Party legitimacy that was brought about by this crisis.

6.8 Conclusion

The government’s record in managing the milk crisis was very mixed. The period of inaction was inexcusable, but once the news broke internationally, government actions were prompt. Overall, the crisis was effectively contained in the short term but left unprecedented resentment against the government. Also, in the years following the milk scandal, a migration wave out of China began, and most of those that moved out belonged

to the upper-middle class and the middle class – strata of society that China desperately needed at the time of rapid transition in order to buffer social dislocation. One of the reasons behind emigration was that people saw through the milk scandal about rampant capitalism in which rogue businesses colluded with local political interests to exploit the people, the conduct of which had no bottom line. Everyone in China who felt unbearable about this shared an ‘abandoning the sinking boat’ mentality (Xiao, 2011). Equally, the milk scandal voided most of China’s attempts to promote the Chinese model and soft power. When these two concepts produced a harsh reality which could not even convince China’s own people that life in China was attractive, how could it look compelling to the rest of the world?

More importantly, the routine, three stages crisis management strategy, i.e. shifting the dominating paradigm, centralising power and reconnecting with the people, worked poorly in the handling of the milk scandal. This was owing to the fact that China’s political system was full of contradictions which were unlikely to be addressed by these short-term measures. And, as far as this incident was concerned, the political utility of the CCP-style crisis management seemed to be exhausted.

First, paradigm shifts without political reform are more often than not superficial. The same problem will recur because these shifts are all interim measures that only address the phenomenon and not the systematic contradictions that caused the problem. For instance, in December 2009 and January 2010, three cases of producing and selling melamine-tainted milk were discovered even though the government shifted the paradigm towards much more stringent regulations after the 2008 milk scandal (New York Times, 2010).

Second, the efficacy of the centralisation of power may increasingly decay in face of a crisis originating from multiple sources of risk. As China’s global involvement

deepens, more risks are likely to originate from multiple domestic and international sources. In other words, China is likely to face more challenges of a world risk society, in which economic and technological decisions are made in a very decentralised fashion that causes huge uncertainties which easily transcend national, sector and policy area boundaries (Wishnick, 2009). In this regard, the efficacy of a highly centralised and concerted effort against risk society crisis will be diluted by multiple sources of risk. For instance, numerous cases of the abuse of food additives were discovered despite the government's crackdown on the milk scandal in 2008, because government 'quick fixes are even more quickly undone' (New York Times, 2011). This was because government efforts only concentrated on addressing the risks involved in food production, and so these efforts did little to mitigate the risks originating elsewhere – food prices, local protectionism, the absence of consumer pressure groups, etc. In 2011, the Chongqing police announced that it would eradicate food contamination in the way it had effectively cracked down organised crime previously (People's Net, 2011a)¹⁰¹. But even for the mighty Chongqing government, only limited results were achieved owing to multiple sources of risk involved in food safety, most of which the police could do little about.

Lastly, in reconnecting with the people, the Party goal of keeping a grip on power indefinitely implied that this accessible gesture would often be temporary. Moreover, owing to advances in social media, more and more evidence emerged of the Party's disconnection with the mass public, rendering this gesture incredibly dishonest. The fact that the Party leadership enjoyed a superior quality of everything – those living in Zhongnanhai even enjoyed strictly purified fresh air after the capital's dirty air that the

¹⁰¹ Chongqing launched a crackdown on organised crime after Bo Xilai, also a member of the Politburo, became the city's Party chief. It was the most high profile crackdown on crime in China in recent years. A number of 'gang masters', including former deputy chief of Chongqing's public security bureau, were executed. Comments on the crackdown polarised, some argued that it frequently used extra-judicial measures and mass movement approaches in place of judicial process, and thus undermined rule by law; but others contended that such a crackdown maintained social order and thus benefited the people generally.

mass public breathe was rated by the US embassy in Beijing as 'hazardous' (Xu, 2011). All this counter evidence suggested that the Party pursued a set of interests that were different from and irrelevant to the people. Furthermore, intra-Party checks and balances, such as the Party's accountability system, also failed in stemming the tendency of the Party's alienation from the people. For instance, some of those fired for administrative or political misconduct in the wake of the 'accountability storm' following the milk scandal were reinstated in other senior positions or even got promoted somehow after 1 to 2 years (Zeng, 2012).

All in all, CCP crisis management is a direct reflection of the predicaments China's political system is currently facing, i.e. the contradiction between market and state, decentralisation and centralisation, international responsibility and domestic obligation, and most importantly, between keeping a grip on power on the one hand, whilst empowering the people to participate in the political process in an orderly manner on the other. In the decade of Hu-Wen's leadership, political reforms that aimed to address these primary contradictions almost stagnated and solutions were yet to be found. As a result, the efficacy of the CCP's crisis management is also gradually decreasing, because without a breakthrough in political institutions, there is less political utility that can be tapped through crises, but more contradictions will accumulate from crises. So far the three cases have been thoroughly studied. The next task is to compare them in order to identify what they have in common and what makes them differ from each other.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

After the three cases have been thoroughly studied, the task for the conclusion is to make further generalisations through comparison, and to make some predictions based on the pattern we have established thus far. The conclusion is also structured in response to the three research questions set out in the introduction. As we proceed through the conclusion, we will give broad answers to these questions and explain the answers in detail.

7.1 The Comparison of Case Studies

- 1) How well has the CCP managed crises so far?*
- 2) What are the important factors that condition the efficacy of the CCP's crisis management?*

The comparison serves the purpose of responding to the first two research questions set out in the Introduction. It is divided into two sections. In the first section we compare the overall efficacy of government crisis management and explain whether this (in)efficacy is also perceived by the people. The second section compares the three crises according to the five contextualising themes that we set out in Chapter 3. In so doing, we seek to discern elements of change over time, and observe whether a temporary political opening or contraction in times of crisis is fed back into the broader political context.

7.1.1 The Overall Efficacy of Crisis Management and Popular Response

I. Short-term Efficacy

Generally speaking, all three crises were effectively brought under control if measured by short-term results, even by international standards. In the combat against SARS, despite the initial chaos caused by inaction and misinformation, China responded strongly after a consensus on the severity of the crisis was reached in the top leadership. This helped largely to eliminate the virus in fewer than three months, whereas in other territories, with many fewer SARS cases, it took longer. In medical terms, despite having the largest number of infection cases, China's case fatality ratio was the lowest among countries with fatal cases (WHO, 2003). In the Sichuan earthquake, the Chinese central government's response was prompt from the beginning, winning endorsement not only from the international community in general, but from organisations traditionally critical about China, such as the European Parliament (European Parliament, 2008). The worldwide, live broadcasted rescue effort during the immediate aftermath of the quake was arguably the most positive image of the Chinese government presented by western media since Tiananmen. This timely rescue effort contrasted sharply with the Cyclone Nargis which swept through Myanmar during roughly the same period, and contrasted considerably with the rescue effort of the US government in the 2005 Hurricane Katrina that was widely criticised for its chaotic handling. In August 2009, the Taiwanese government handled the Typhoon Morakot poorly. Taiwanese media cited China's earthquake rescue in 2008 and Wen Jiabao's prompt arrival at the scene and blamed the hesitation of Ma Ying-jeou, Taiwan's president (Nownews.com, 2009). For the milk scandal, although its impact on Chinese soft power and the reputation of Chinese-made goods was devastating, China was

resolute in shutting down the production facilities in question and in punishing criminals as soon as the crisis became international. Its behaviour in resolving subsequent international trade disputes as a result of the tainted milk was also largely cooperative.

In all three cases, China was able to mobilise quickly the Party, the governmental and the military (in the first two cases) apparatuses in a concerted effort once the crisis consensus was reached. It managed to contain these crises more rapidly than democratic systems owing to its possession of ‘authoritarian advantages’ – namely, the ability to centralise power, public support for government-initiated mobilisation, and tactical control of information in the course of fighting crises (Schwartz, 2012).

II. Long-term Efficacy

If we look beyond the immediate effects of crisis management in these cases, however, results were more mixed. Here our focus is on the lasting effect (how well the root causes of a given crisis were addressed so that it would not easily recur) and the lasting momentum (how long the initial transformative opening lasted, and whether it constituted an institutional change that contributed to more effective management of future similar crises). We saw a loose correlation in which the long-term efficacy of crisis management varied with the degree of exogeneity of that crisis, i.e. *the higher (lower) the level of external threats embedded in a given crisis, the more (less) effective the crisis management will be.*

This is because the full utilisation of authoritarian advantages is conditioned upon either a real external threat, or one that is perceived as real. Without this exogenous dimension in a crisis, there will be little ground to justify the centralisation of power because there is no clear target against which a mobilisation from within can be initiated.

Similarly, public support for the government can only be strong and monolithic if the threat is external to the body politic. Regarding the tactical control of information, the propaganda system needs at least some symptoms of an external threat in order to manipulate and mould popular perceptions about an exogenous crisis, and only with the presence of an external enemy can propaganda be more convincing than usual. Conversely, using authoritarian advantages to address an endogenous crisis, where the threat originates from within the system, will only lead to chaos that devastates the system. The Cultural Revolution was a classic example of such misuse.

The SARS crisis was a two-stage crisis if defined in terms of the level of exogeneity. In the stage prior to the Politburo's arrival at consensus, the crisis emerged as a typical fragmented authoritarianism predicament from within – the confrontation of departmental interests paralysed decision making. In the latter stage the Politburo overcame the internal gridlock through the centralisation of power, after which SARS was defined as a threat external to the system. SARS was also depicted more as an epidemic than a political crisis, despite the fact that the crisis response was heavily politicised. From then on, SARS was in large part no different from schistosomiasis, smallpox, cholera and other epidemics in the 1950s. And, by using mobilisation tactics similar to those which effectively eliminated other epidemics, the effective containment of SARS was not unexpected.

After SARS, the institutions dealing with new epidemics were revamped, meaning that if such epidemics did emerge in the future, they would constitute routine and familiar crises for which the threat would be always external to the system. This exogeneity, relative to the political system, lent considerable efficacy to the effective prevention and control of new epidemics. When the global pandemic of H1N1 swine flu reached China in 2009, it was clearly labelled as an 'imported' virus (Xinhua, 2009d), i.e. it was not just

external to the Chinese political and medical systems, but came from outside the Chinese territory. Swine flu tested China's revamped system and, although China's response was not perfect owing to its controversial, heavy-handed measures against international travellers, it passed the test politically as overreaction was perhaps more indicative of system robustness (the momentum of nerves as a result of SARS), as opposed to internal flaws. Overall, lessons learnt from SARS improved China's long-term efficacy in managing epidemics. In addition, the high profile dismissal of senior officials during SARS set a precedent for political accountability which continued into future crises. Overall, crisis management in SARS has had satisfactory long-term efficacy in terms of both lasting effect and lasting momentum.

The Sichuan earthquake was also a two-stage crisis, but with exogeneity dominating the early stage and growing endogeneity characterising the latter stage. Since the first Politburo meeting hours after the quake, the crisis has been defined as a natural disaster entirely external to the system. This definition ensured the Party-state apparatus (and the military soon after) responded in a monolithic way, and greatly facilitated the extraordinary mobilisation of personnel and material resources towards Sichuan. As such, the Sichuan earthquake was largely a familiar crisis for the CCP and a continuity of the 'man must conquer nature' mode first devised in the Mao era, but which has been added to with a more humanist tinge in recent years. In the latter stage in which the media and popular attention shifted away from immense sympathy to the actual disaster impact and the distribution of such impact, however, the endogeneity of the crisis seemed to be increasing. As more scandals broke out which resulted in the disproportionate vulnerability of school children and other less advantaged groups in the face of natural hazards, questions were raised about poor building codes, regional disparity and official corruption. Blame was laid on the deep flaws in governance and in the political system which failed to

mitigate disaster risks *ex ante* and exacerbated devastation *ex post*. From then on, the disclosure of and controversy around these scandals as well as the government's harsh response to them all helped to turn the Sichuan earthquake from a seemingly exogenous crisis into an endogenous one.

After the Sichuan earthquake, China's regime for handling major natural disasters was further revised. Noticeable changes included a revision of the legal framework so that civilian leaders could also get involved in decision making regarding the deployment of the PLA during major natural disasters (Gov.cn, 2010a). The PLA also enacted its own regulation on strengthening the capability in non-combat military missions, signifying the PLA's increasing emphasis on NTS. On a technical level, the PLA established at the national and provincial levels a 950,000 strong force designated to handling natural disasters (PLA Daily, 2012). In subsequent natural disasters, such as the 2010 Yushu earthquake and the Zhouqu debris flow in the same year, these new institutional arrangements improved civilian-military cooperation as well as personnel and equipment preparedness, which should count as evidence of their lasting effects. However, civil effervescence, as found in the immediate aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake, was not sustained when state relief forces gradually dominated the quake zone and needed only minimal complementary assistance from civil society. As the school collapse scandal unfolded, civil society resistance was suppressed. When the state-led reconstruction started in a very centralised manner, civil society involvement was also limited. During the Yushu earthquake and the Zhouqu debris flow, civil society did not have a significant presence and in the former case volunteers were asked not to go to the quake zone (Beijing News, 2010). The lack of training for these amateur volunteers could be a good reason for discouraging their involvement. But the fact that Yushu was a Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture might suggest why this time the government treated civil society differently –

because it did not want to lose control in an area where ethnic relations were delicate. Retrospectively, it might also indicate that civil effervescence in Sichuan was highly contingent and one-off. In this respect, it did not achieve lasting momentum. Therefore, crisis management in the Sichuan earthquake had a less satisfactory long-term efficacy overall, with the failure of sustaining lasting momentum offsetting progress made in terms of lasting effect.

The milk scandal can also be divided into two stages. However, the characteristics of this crisis during both stages were almost identical – that was, endogenous. Before the central government stepped in, it was the combination of endogenous factors, namely, the dysfunctioning local political economy and the central government's weak regulatory and enforcement capacity on quality assurance, that led to the problem of deliberate milk contamination. When there were signs regarding this scandal emerging around the time of the Olympics, it was the Party's propaganda apparatus that censored the circulation of crucial health information that could have been used to prevent the crisis from snowballing. Even after the central government intervened when the crisis became international, the source of the threat or embarrassment was still predominantly endogenous. As such, the government faced a predicament in which the stronger its decisive intervention, the more fundamental problems these actions would expose. For instance, when it announced a shift in the paradigm of quality assurance, people were shocked by the fact that in China, where fake and substandard goods were part of everyday life, an 'exempt from inspection' system had existed for many years that favoured big corporations. When the government centralised medical and political resources by establishing a LSG to enforce nationwide quality inspections, people subsequently learnt that the scandal was not just with Sanlu, but industry-wide. Throughout the unfolding of the milk scandal, the sources of market, governance and government failures were almost

entirely internal to the system such that the propaganda machinery was struggling to articulate a sense of external threat. It finally did so by identifying the criminals involved in poisoning as the external threat. But as expected, such tactics were perceived by the people as another example of finding a scapegoat and insulating the government from disastrous consequences its nonfeasance caused.

After the Sanlu scandal, cases of producing and selling melamine-tainted milk resurfaced (New York Times, 2010), and food scares were still part of everyday life in China. In fact, the Sanlu scandal was merely one major incident in a long sequence of food safety crises besetting the Chinese government over the years. It was not the first of its kind but a climax in terms of audacity, and without substantive changes in the food safety regime and the broader context supporting it, it would not be the last. In this regard, the crackdown on Sanlu had little lasting effect. This leads naturally to the question of lasting momentum, to which the answer is more complex. On the one hand, the central government has been on high alert with regards to food safety. Its efforts in building a more rational bureaucracy as well as updating and tidying up food standards should not be neglected. On the other hand, most of the progress appeared to have occurred within the State Council, whereas other important agencies – for example the propaganda apparatus and local governments – seemed to be reluctant to shift their routine practices that impeded the full realisation of benefits associated with the revamped food safety regime. That is to say, without the propaganda apparatus providing a transparent information context and without local governments moving away from GDPism, the lasting momentum in terms of perfecting the food safety regime alone only achieved limited efficacy. More fundamentally, the effective prevention of future food scares would require a balanced relationship between the state, market and civil society (consumer protection in this case) which the current system was not able to support. Without this balanced relationship, what

Wen Jiabao repeatedly urged businesses to have, the ‘moral blood’ (Xinhua, 2010a) (a term he created as he read Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*), would simply become hollow moral preaching. As such, the overall long-term efficacy of the Sanlu crackdown has been low, and the poorest among all three cases.

III. Popular Response

Popular responses to the three crises were also correlated with the extent of perceived external threats. *The higher (lower) the degree of external threats that are pervasively felt, the higher (lower) the popular support to the government in the course of its crisis management.*

As we have seen above, there is a propensity on the part of the CCP to manipulate a given crisis by ideationally ‘converting’ it from an endogenous crisis into an exogenous one. The ideational conversion is normally handled by the propaganda apparatus that makes every effort to highlight the ‘external threats’ dimension of the crisis, whilst downplaying its internal systematic origins in order to garner popular support. Or, looking from a slightly different angle, the CCP often wants to convert a novel and unfamiliar crisis into a routine and familiar one so as to enable the full utilisation of what the CCP excels in – mobilisation and logistics, or the ‘people’s war’ mode. But for either strategy of conversion, not every type of crisis can be manipulated at ease. Therefore, the ‘convertibility’ of a given crisis directly affects how the people view it.

Popular responses to the SARS crisis varied with the changing origin of the threat. When the virus mysteriously emerged and spread in southern China but before the government publicly acknowledged the actual extent of infection, the public response was a mixture of panic and distrust towards the government. The people arguably panicked

about the mysterious virus as much as they did about the information opacity, especially when the government ordered a news blackout on the issue. With little information, they would rather believe in rumours and rushed to buy things that were rumoured to be able to kill SARS. The intensity of public anxiety culminated in a large scale flight out of Beijing involving hundreds of thousands of Chinese and foreign residents. In fact, this panic caused significant disruption to public order – the opposite effect of social stability that the government had hoped for. Nothing else could best exemplify the irony of the government's ostrich policy than the Chinese Health Minister's statement that SARS was under control. Panic, empty streets (but overcrowded railway stations), and conflicting information given by domestic and foreign media, were all good evidence that a public health crisis was escalating into a political crisis. The threats from within – misinformation, system fragmentation and inaction – were much greater than the epidemic itself. As the once-in-a-decade leadership transition was going on amid the SARS panic, the people also learnt that the Party would preserve its grip on power at all costs.

After the government admitted its failure in controlling SARS and provided the public with complete information, the public response to the government also rebounded. With the state media operating at full capacity to propagate heroic stories in fighting the virus and the theme of unity, the popular response also became nationalistic from within, which was not unexpected given that, at this point, the framing of SARS portrayed it as an entirely external threat. It should be noted here that the government's decisive intervention in SARS coincided with the completion of the leadership transition in which Hu and Wen were formally instated as state leaders (and perhaps Hu-Wen also deliberately utilised this to highlight their distinction from the previous leadership). Therefore, although public support for the CCP regime as a whole changed considerably as the government reversed its course in SARS, public attitudes towards the Hu-Wen leadership specifically were more

positive, because the anxious masses ‘required’ a different leadership. The leadership transition enabled Hu-Wen somehow to break with past mistakes under the previous leadership and to highlight their different approach to SARS as agents of change¹⁰². In this regard, the generous attitudes towards the much-needed leadership consolidated the popular base of the Hu-Wen leadership.

The popular response to the Sichuan earthquake was perhaps the most positive in all three crises. This high level of popular support both for the government and for the Hu-Wen leadership was unsurprising given the nature of the crisis and the particular temporal milieu in which the earthquake occurred. To the CCP, this crisis was a conventional one, the response to which required no time-consuming consensus building. It was a natural disaster for which the immense rescue needs required effective centralised mobilisation that the CCP was best at delivering. The conventionality of the crisis made the CCP comfortable and confident with more transparency. This resulted in the most timely and unrestricted media coverage of the CCP leadership in recent years and such high visibility greatly boosted the popularity of Hu-Wen. Moreover, the temporary openness of the political system in the immediate aftermath of the quake stimulated better than ever state-society relations. This openness enabled a large section of the society to participate in a historic event in all forms – online, offline and onsite. Public support increased further when the state responded to the people’s sentiment in the form of a series of national commemorative rituals.

In addition, the earthquake occurred amid two pinnacles of nationalist sentiment: an earlier one associated with the Tibet riot and a later one associated with the Olympics (and the two events were interconnected too). Public support for the government had been already high before the earthquake hit Sichuan. The Olympics, as an event of ‘mass

¹⁰² Some interesting facts further supported this distinction, that when the Hu-Wen government was fighting SARS in Beijing where the spread of the virus was most severe, Jiang Zemin fled to Shanghai and met foreign guests there. The two pieces of news were broadcasted nationally in the same evening.

distraction' that shifted people's attention away from various ongoing political, economic and social problems (Brady, 2009:1), also had the effect of masking local resistance evolving around issues such as the school collapse scandal wherein the origin of the threat was clearly internal. Therefore, the overwhelming Olympics theme presumably maintained the public's positive response until after the Olympics, despite later controversies showing that endogenously originated threats, such as corruption, aggravated the impact of this 'exogenous' and 'natural' disaster on the ordinary people.

As suggested above, the long-term efficacy of the crackdown on Sanlu was the most negative of all three crises, and so was the public response to it. Popular distrust and suspicion of Chinese-made products, as well as of the regime governing the quality of these products, has continued years after Sanlu. The endogeneity of the crisis, revealed after the scandal, triggered substantial public resentment against the system as a whole. People not only questioned the central government's malfeasance on quality assurance, but the blame also extended to the local government which it oversaw that covered up the scandal; to the media it controlled that deliberately propagated false information and misled consumers; to the immoral businesses it endorsed that produced contaminated milk for quick profits; and, ultimately, to the Chinese model of growth that linked all these dysfunctional sub-systems and resulted in this systematic failure.

The Hu-Wen leadership in particular was unable to escape the blame either. The endogenous origins of the crisis made them especially embarrassed such that they were unable to rally the masses behind them like they did when confronting an external enemy. When Wen Jiabao came out on behalf of the CCP, trying to reconnect with the people by promising remedial measures, the stories that emerged – suggesting that the leadership echelons and their family ate specially grown and sourced, super safe food – made Wen's benevolent and caring gesture insincere. The appearance of such news created a negative

popular impression that the government's quality assurance regime, as well as the leadership *themselves*, were both responsible for the milk scandal. As such, the milk crisis was devastating to the CCP's public image and was a huge blow to its legitimacy.

7.1.2 The Comparison of Crises in terms of Themes

I. The GDP Centred Political Economy

After China underwent three crises, it can be concluded that GDPism, the prominent feature of the Chinese model, has not fundamentally changed. SARS, the earthquake and the milk scandal respectively exposed the social, environmental and regulatory imbalances at the heart of this growth model. However, at least in practice, GDPism remains the dominating paradigm despite costly lessons.

The difficulty or inability to shift permanently away from an exclusive focus on GDP growth, first and foremost, lies in the CCP basing legitimacy on performance. In other words, unless the CCP creatively finds other convincing pillars to support its legitimacy (which it has not yet found in the period under examination), this chronic GDPism is likely to perpetuate. On a more practical level, extractive central-local fiscal relations and performance-based cadre evaluations (in which the 'hard target' of GDP growth still has an overriding importance) have not created enough incentives for local officials to embrace a more balanced growth model.

Certainly, although GDPism is still deep-seated, the three major crises did stimulate the government to invest a significant amount of resources and effort in alleviating the ruthlessness of GDPism. After SARS, the making of social policy in China has been rising in importance, whereas before SARS social policy was considered a part of economic

policy, which under the influence of economic neoliberalism had led to the over-marketisation of social services (Zheng, 2012b). The government therefore has been making efforts towards building a minimal but universal social safety net. As a result, spending on healthcare and especially on the control of infectious diseases has soared, and an advanced national disease alerting system has been established (China Newsweek, 2013). As the learning from the earthquake, the government for the first time included a separate section on disaster prevention and mitigation in the Twelfth Five Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (Gov.cn, 2011c). The National Comprehensive Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Plan was also enacted (Gov.cn, 2011b). Both national plans backed the increase of funding in consolidating disaster resilience at national and local levels. Similarly, the milk scandal was a wake-up call for the government to enhance product safety regimes which lagged behind phenomenal growth. Significant funding was allocated for improving product quality assurance infrastructures, including setting up test centres with the latest equipment. The government campaign to promote quality-based and value-added economic growth, rather than focusing on the growth figure itself, has also heightened after the milk scandal. In sum, the government has taken substantive measures to redress GDPism by building up its capacity to mitigate risks associated with the single-minded pursuit of GDP growth, and these measures seem even more tangible in financial terms.

What remains less tangible and more ambiguous is the government's promise to replace 'the economic task of generating growth' with 'a political task of promoting development' (Breslin, 2008b:218) at a more fundamental level. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the discourses of the SDC and 'Harmonious Society' were promoted as early as 2003-4. But as discussed above, local incompletion (or the inability to comply owing to local imperatives to generate enough revenue) means that such a paradigm shift is unrealistic in

the short term. Occasionally, local officials even view disasters as stimulators of growth because of the huge sums of resources put in by the central government on reconstruction ¹⁰³. Even for the central government, its commitment to balanced development and quality-based growth is not always consistent. For example, in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, the central government's priority temporarily shifted back to being growth focused (and to a lesser extent, the same happened in the second quarter of 2012 when growth slowed down). Taken together, discourses on shifting away from the paradigm of a GDP-centred political economy largely remain rhetorical.

II. State Control of Information

This is a complex area where state behaviour varied considerably on a case-by-case basis. In order to understand these changes better, our analysis is divided into the 'hard' and 'soft' side of information control.

On the hard and more direct side of control, i.e. media censorship, SARS was undoubtedly the most censored crisis and the earthquake was the least censored crisis. This was explained by the fact that SARS only became a full-blown crisis due to causes which were political, whereas the cause of the earthquake was natural. This significant difference in human malpractice made the government confident in refraining from routine censorship of the media surge during the earthquake relief. In addition, the government's genuine commitment to open information (only) regarding natural disasters, and the generally looser information environment surrounding the Olympics, contributed to the unprecedented transparency during the earthquake relief. Minimal censorship in this regard actually helped the government to rebuild its international image as international media

¹⁰³ In an interview with an estate manager worked in the reconstruction of the Sichuan earthquake, the interviewee told me that local officials saw the earthquake as an opportunity because the state-led reconstruction would enable their county to 'catch up economically for at least twenty years'.

freely conveyed mixed, but mostly positive messages on China's resilience and otherwise rarely seen humane face. The milk scandal was more complicated in terms of censorship. Unlike in SARS and the earthquake where the ultimate discretion to control or release information was retained by the state, in the milk scandal business interests played an important part in censoring crucial health information from going public. Business sponsored censorship activities were more decentralised, frequent and difficult to control, and they eroded both public interests and Party legitimacy.

On the soft and more indirect side of control, i.e. the manipulation of information, state behaviour was also inconsistent at the height of the three crises. Regarding the flow of information, in SARS this flow was top-down and hierarchical during the mass campaign to contain the virus. In the earthquake relief, the flow of information was more interactive between state and society, and within society. However, when it came to addressing the milk scandal, the flow of information was again top-down, similar to the situation during the fight against SARS.

Similarly, in regard to the openness of the discourse, SARS and the milk scandal both featured close-ended discourses. These state-dominated discourses were promoted by the propaganda apparatus as the hegemonic crisis discourses, whereas other societal discourses were suppressed. In contrast, during the earthquake relief, although the state discourse was prominent, it was friendly to the grassroots discourse. Indeed, part of the grassroots discourse was integrated into the state discourse, making the latter a predominant but open-ended discourse compared to more closed discourses in SARS and the milk scandal. Nevertheless, this once open-ended discourse turned increasingly defensive as confronting societal discourses emerged around the school collapse scandal.

In relation to politicising information, the three crises again exhibited major differences. SARS was similar to previous crises handled by the CCP in that Party

propaganda framed the crisis as a heroic and patriotic mass campaign led by the CCP. In the earthquake, such politicisation was minimal. Heroism and patriotism were still promoted but their prominence gave way to more individual based and liberal values of humanitarianism, respect for lives and resilience. In the milk scandal, despite a brief propaganda campaign conveying leadership resolve and benevolence, Party propaganda made every effort to depoliticise and play down this crisis because it was caused almost entirely by malpractice within the political system.

In light of these differences in different aspects, if there was a general pattern to be discerned on state control of information since SARS, it was the state's (unwilling) decision to ride rather than stem the tide of information. As the lesson from SARS demonstrated, in a wired society, blunt censorship on news that was already publicly known became increasingly ineffectual and counterproductive. In order to stay relevant, Party propaganda has adapted its matrix of control strategies by placing more emphasis on the soft side of control, i.e. managing and manipulating information and moulding public opinion, as opposed to suppressing information bluntly (Blecher, 2009). And, as we have seen in the earthquake and the milk scandal, the framing of a crisis is as important as providing up-to-date information on a crisis. It remains an open question, however, whether people will continue to believe in the Party's definition and framing of crisis.

III. State-society Relations

As discussed in Chapter 3 that the evolution of state control of information and state-society relations went hand-in-hand, when it came to comparing crises regarding these two interrelated themes, the pattern of behaviour was also similar. The U-turn as found in the government's commitment to open information was also evident in state-society relations.

This U-turn on state-society relations was largely consistent with the CCP's changing perceptions on social stability that shifted from dynamic to static stability. The new leadership's handling of SARS perhaps marked the beginning of more dynamic and engaging state-society relations, during which Hu-Wen highlighted themselves as a more open and accessible leadership compared to the previous leadership who were largely responsible for the initial cover-up (Weatherley, 2006). More precisely, after Hu-Wen admitted the true extent of the epidemic, there emerged two new elements in state-society relations previously unseen, namely, transparency and accountability. They were built into the (implicit) Chinese social contract and have become the norms in societal expectations of the state. The addition of transparency and accountability into state-society relations seemed to be irreversible, even during a period of deterioration in state-society relations when the milk scandal broke out, transparency and accountability were still evident.

If there was a moment when China's state and society stood side-by-side, on a nearly equal footing, it was in the first few weeks following the Sichuan earthquake. Civic effervescence during the earthquake relief showed that, after China's state and the market had risen respectively in the first and subsequent three decades since the founding of the PRC, the Chinese society has also come to the fore since 2008. Such civic effervescence also demonstrated that, at least in the context of a catastrophe, popular participation would improve state-society relations and would lead to dynamic social stability. The state also seized this wave of dynamic stability by engaging with the people through the symbolic action of lowering the national flag for the ordinary people for the first time. The significance of this was that humanism was becoming the norm in the societal expectations of the state. As a result, national mourning for ordinary victims in natural disasters has been institutionalised into state rituals.

It should be noted that contingent factors such as the nationalist sentiment and the volunteering spirit surrounding the Olympics catalysed, if not caused, unprecedented open relations between state and society. In hindsight, the Sichuan earthquake was truly an outlier in the development of state-society relations during the Hu era. Without these favourable contingent factors, the height of state-society interaction and popular participation has been unseen ever since, even in natural disasters such as the Yushu earthquake and the Zhouqu debris flow. Although civic participation contributed to the government-led relief effort, Party officials might also be astonished by the scale of self-organisation took place outside the state corporatism framework. The concern with Party hegemony, along with the complacency grown out of organising a highly successful Olympics, led to the resurgence of a totalitarian control mentality. The Party's perception of social stability thus shifted towards static stability.

The Party's obsession with static stability was already evident in the suppression of protests against the school collapse scandal which emerged after the earthquake. Since then, the Party-state has become increasingly defensive and impatient in dealing with societal discontent. The milk scandal happened to break out amid this contraction of state-society relations. After a brief period of opening in which the Party demonstrated its commitment to transparency and accountability, and after the top leadership showed a caring gesture, the influence of the Party-state soon overwhelmed the aftermath of the crisis. The government suppressed collective actions by parents whose children were made ill by the tainted milk. Moreover, in the course of politicising the legal system, the Party-state interfered with judiciary work in that no parents were able to bring Sanlu to justice through legal means. It even resorted to the old reflex of divide and rule, persuading and even coercing the parents into accepting the government's compensation plan. In short, the

milk scandal represented a significant deterioration in state-society relations compared to SARS and the Sichuan earthquake.

What the three crises did have in common with regard to state-society relations, however, was that these cases invariably revealed the weakness of Chinese civil society, or that the potential of civil society in crisis management and in everyday governance alike had not been fully utilised. If civil society was able to self-organise and transmit information between the state and the public, the panic buying and panic escaping during SARS might be much less severe. In the earthquake, if more NGOs were capable of working in extreme conditions, they might have been able to sustain their involvement well into the reconstruction phase, and play a more significant role in the state-society-market tripartite partnership in the reconstruction. Before the milk scandal, if substantive consumer pressure groups existed, the contamination problem might have been spotted at a much earlier stage; and after the children and their parents suffered, these pressure groups would have been able to articulate interest on their behalf. Indeed, the fundamental impediment to civil society development lies in the Party's ambivalence over whether to empower or control civil society. The weak position of civil society in China relative to the state and the market is difficult to overcome unless the Party resolves its ambivalence. As a result, in managing future crises the Party-state is still likely to play a dominant role.

IV. Policy Making

This is an area in which China's behaviour has been more consistent. In the Hu era, China's crisis management regime in the aspects of decision making and policy making has made remarkable progress in legal-rational terms (Weatherley, 2006). This progress

over time is palpable when comparing crisis management at political, administrative and operational levels.

At the high politics level, the efficiency of consensus building and decision making has improved remarkably. When the SARS virus spread wildly, the top leadership was unable to reach a consensus about taking drastic actions. They seemed to be preoccupied with their factional interests over the people's concerns, such that they could not even demonstrate apparent unity. When appearing on state television, Hu-Wen and other members of the PSC close to Jiang had different attitudes towards fighting SARS, as anxious people watched the glaringly obvious infighting and waited for clarifications. It was not until Hu convened a special PSC meeting on fighting SARS that a consensus was reached and the CCP took unified actions to fight SARS in an all-out manner. Having learnt from the SARS debacle, the CCP realised that it could not afford another paralysis when a future crisis occurred. It has thus become routine to hold PSC special meetings whenever there is a crisis¹⁰⁴. This institutional arrangement to speed up consensus building and centralise power as early as possible worked well in the Sichuan earthquake, in that a special PSC meeting was held just hours after the quake, securing a prompt, unified and internationally praised relief effort. The same happened after the milk scandal became publicly known (People's Daily, 2008b). Although the milk scandal was not handled as openly as the earthquake, the Party-state's response was nevertheless prompt and well coordinated.

At the administrative or bureaucratic politics level, improvements tended to be more uneven. The earthquake relief was undoubtedly the most well coordinated case (probably because of its sheer scale which meant that the Party-state could not afford to mishandle it), during which the persistent problem of fragmented authoritarianism was

¹⁰⁴ For minutes of PSC and the full Politburo meetings in the Hu era, see http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2005-11/28/content_3846709.htm; http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2007-10/24/content_6931869.htm; http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2007-10/24/content_6931869_1.htm

largely overcome. Fragmented authoritarianism, however, was more evident in SARS and the milk scandal but in different ways. In SARS, the initial failure to make a concerted effort was owing to fragmented responsibilities between civilian and military health authorities, whereas in the milk scandal poor governance in food safety was a result of overlapping responsibilities between agencies.

Nonetheless, the government's effort in rationalising bureaucracy has been going on for decades, in the hope of mitigating fragmented authoritarianism through clearly defined policy jurisdictions for different departments and agencies. In the Hu-Wen era alone, there were already three rounds of administrative reshuffling and streamlining that took place in 2003, 2008 and 2013 respectively. So far these reforms only seemed to occur following major crises (which was probably also true in any other country), and in a tinkering manner. Also, these administrative reforms tended only to address fragmented authoritarianism in a particular policy area where a major crisis had occurred. For example, the administrative reshuffling after SARS effectively helped to form a concerted effort in containing H1N1, but it did little to alleviate fragmented authoritarianism in food safety. It may take a long time for the Chinese crisis management regime to overcome fragmented authoritarianism in every major policy area through learning from different types of crisis.

At the operational level, progress has been more remarkable because at this level the matter of concern is more technical than political. SARS in this respect was truly a catalyst for operational capacity building in crisis management. Most notable was the flourishing of thousands of national, departmental and local contingency plans. Without learning from SARS, some plans that were quickly invoked in the earthquake and the milk scandal would have never existed. Many of these plans drew experience from other countries as well as from previous crises in China, reflecting an impressive learning

capacity and adaptability on the part of the Chinese government, which lent considerable crisis resilience for the Party-state.

V. International Pressure

Of all the contextual themes, China's crisis behaviour in regard to international pressure has been the most consistent. And to a large extent, progress made in this aspect over the three crises is linear. Over the three NTS crises, it seems that China has been adopting a more flexible approach to sovereignty that it once interpreted in the strictest Westphalian sense (although it continues to do so when it comes to traditional political-military crises). Even for SARS, in which China's behaviour was the least cooperative among the three crises, China still granted access to the WHO inspection and research teams before it admitted the underreporting. Chinese leaders also expressed willingness for extensive international cooperation on public health, and unusually apologised at international occasions for mistakes made in SARS (Zheng and Lye, 2004). These gestures from the top leadership signalled a change in China's attitude towards the international community in that its embracing of international institutions was moving beyond economic affairs, and into the realm of (human) security.

Although the Chinese government intervened decisively during SARS, damage to its international reputation as a responsible great power was inevitable. China realised after SARS that its state-centred policy making also needed to include the concerns of both domestic and international stakeholders. The Sichuan earthquake occurred against this backdrop and China's learning from SARS materialised. Contrary to SARS during which it only cooperated when pressed, in the earthquake China voluntarily requested international assistance. Moreover, the responsiveness, transparency and openness that the Chinese

government demonstrated in the earthquake relief, and the respectful and dignified way in which the Chinese government treated its citizens, living and dead, showed that China had taken a big stride forward in following international norms in disaster management. These showed that despite China being ideologically reserved towards ‘universal’ liberal values such as democracy and human rights in the western sense, it was more willing to embrace fundamental values such as the right to life and the right to security of the person, which it demonstrated through doing whatever it took to save the people. It was an indication that China was increasingly embracing the international society on ideational grounds, in addition to instrumental grounds (Buzan, 2010).

Although it was without doubt that China’s handling of the milk scandal was flawed, China responded more positively to international pressure than domestic pressure. It was not until the New Zealand government alerted Beijing that the Chinese government promptly despatched inspection teams and confirmed milk contamination. When facing international criticism, China responded apologetically, avoiding a principled or politicised position (or accusing other countries of politicising the issue), which it had taken before April 2003 when the international community fiercely criticised the Chinese government’s deception over SARS. Furthermore, following the milk scandal, China allowed foreign quality assurance agencies to get involved in China’s governance of food safety. The FDA (Food and Drug Administration) of the US has opened offices in China to help the Chinese government to inspect food and medicine exported to the US (FDA, 2012).

From stressing strict non-interference in domestic affairs prior to SARS, to accepting international aid in the earthquake, and to allowing foreign agencies to inspect Chinese products on Chinese soil, China has made unprecedented progress within just five years. As its integration with the international society deepens, China is likely to keep this

momentum up on international cooperation through accepting greater international scrutiny.

7.2 Conclusion: Crisis with Chinese Crisis Management?

3) Are the same strategies of crisis manipulation sustainable enough for the CCP to manage future crises?

This section aims at responding to the last research question as set out in the introduction. As mentioned in the previous chapter, throughout the handling of the milk scandal there were already signs emerging that suggested a diminishing political utility of CCP-style crisis management. This section elaborates on this argument further and assesses the sustainability of CCP-style crisis management with reference to more recent crises. It suggests that the three-phase routine crisis manipulation is increasingly being challenged.

7.2.1 Shifting the Dominating Paradigm

For paradigm shifts after crises, there is always a limit to which such strategy can be implemented in an authoritarian context. The authoritarian nature of the system that rules out the possibility of changing the government means that there cannot be too many paradigm shifts with the same government. If such shifts take place far too often and appear drastic, they inevitably raise the question about government competence, because every new shift constitutes an explicit blame of previous performance of the same

government. After a number of shifts, people will start to wonder if this government can ever get it right.

More importantly, this paradox with paradigm shifts in an authoritarian context can engender adverse consequences for Party legitimacy. As argued throughout this thesis, Chinese politics evolves in a path dependent fashion, and in the system there exists a strong propensity for the continuity of policies and respect for the past (regardless of whether it is in a nostalgic or a more substantive sense). This path dependency restricts the range of options available for a new leadership whenever they want to exhibit their distinctiveness from previous leaderships. They are not able to promote their new paradigm while explicitly criticising the old one, because if they do so it will undermine their legitimacy (because the old paradigm is where they came from) as well as the legitimacy of the system as a whole (because of inconsistency). The CCP seems to be convinced that Khrushchev's Secret Speech attacking Stalin sowed the seeds for a gradual but irreversible decline of regime legitimacy for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and has made every effort to ensure that the same will not happen in the CCP regarding Mao¹⁰⁵.

Inevitably, paradigms promoted as new by any CCP leadership have to build on previous (and already flawed) paradigms, but without denouncing them. The 'newness' of these new paradigms is thus strictly confined to moderating and complementing rather than replacing the old paradigms. Unsurprisingly, these so called new paradigms more often than not become old wine in new bottles, and the seemingly flames of reform associated with these new paradigms will soon be extinguished by the momentum of path dependency. Perhaps more detrimental to regime legitimacy in the long term is that, without the possibility of either breaking away from the past or fundamental political

¹⁰⁵ For a latest example, see Xi Jinping's statement that 'the eras before and after the reform should not be considered as separated history, and must not be considered as thoroughly contradictory', at http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/detail_2013_01/05/20820329_0.shtml

reform, every additional paradigm shift along the dependent path will potentially put an extra constraint on the capacity to articulate reforms for the future leadership. At a certain point, the CCP leadership will face the exhaustion of paradigms upon which they can legitimise themselves. They will not be able to shift to a paradigm that has been used in the past, since if they do so it will appear to be a U-turn under the same government¹⁰⁶. They will have to articulate a new approach to show the rule of the CCP is making progress but at the same time there are fewer and fewer paradigmatic resources left.

So far, the CCP has undergone only four paradigms under Mao, Deng, Jiang and Hu respectively. The danger of paradigm exhaustion does not appear to be impending. Nevertheless, the problem of paradigm shifts as old wine in new bottles is more conspicuous. For example, the most prominent political legacy of Hu-Wen, the SDC, has been promoted for a decade, but when Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang take over, they still face essentially the same structural problems Hu-Wen faced a decade ago. And if the CCP's Sixth Generation take over a decade after and are still confronted with what Hu-Wen and Xi-Li had confronted but left unresolved despite some paradigm shifts, then this will have serious implications for the CCP's credibility (Breslin, 2013).

Nothing better illustrates the limit of crisis-induced paradigm shifts than China's response to the global financial crisis starting in 2008. When the decline in export figures showed that this crisis clearly impacted China, the Chinese government rushed to announce a staggering ¥4 trillion stimulus package aimed at shifting the dominating growth paradigm from export-oriented to domestic consumption-led (Xinhua, 2008m). Ideally, such a shift would require the government to invest heavily in enhancing the social safety net, without which the consumers would not dare to spend. Yet it soon emerged that a large proportion of the expenditure was actually invested in infrastructure such as

¹⁰⁶ A paradigm U-turn concurrent with the change of government, however, is more acceptable.

railways, motorways and airports, because these projects boosted GDP growth almost instantly, whereas investing in the social safety net would only contribute to GDP growth indirectly, and such an effect would be difficult to be demonstrated. The same spending pattern was repeated at the provincial level, with trillions of government expenditure (much greater than the 4 trillion package if added together) being poured in to boost growth. Even worse, a large number of projects previously suspended by the government – owing to their low energy efficiency or uncertain environmental impact – were again approved by the government in the wake of the financial crisis in order to secure GDP growth.

Taken together, this spending preference for investment-intensive projects over the much-needed social safety net was not at all surprising, given the path dependency of GDPism and performance-based regime legitimacy at a deeper level. The importance of the paradigm shift was sidelined when the more eminent target of GDP growth was at stake. Eventually, China's response to the global financial crisis was not so much a paradigm shift as a continuation of GDP centred political economy. Therefore, from this example we can see how superficial paradigm shifts can be in the face of path dependency. In short, the political utility of introducing an apparent paradigm shift following a crisis is declining.

7.2.2 The Centralisation of Power

The political utility of the centralisation of power in crisis management is more ambiguous, and should be analysed with regard to different types of crisis. On the one hand, the centralisation of power is still highly useful in relief efforts of major natural disasters where the impacted locality simply cannot handle the devastating situation on its own. In

such circumstances, the centralisation of power will not only speed up decision making, but also unleash China's formidable capacity in mobilising personnel, relief supply and aid funds, which many countries, democratic or authoritarian alike, cannot match. In this respect, the CCP will still be able to reinforce its people's saviour myth by tapping into popular support in handling natural disasters.

On the other hand, for more governance-originated crises, the centralisation of power may not be a lasting strategy as long as China's day to day governance remains highly decentralised. On this account, centralising power or mobilising campaigns will only deliver short-term results, addressing the phenomena of crises without resolving more fundamental problems underpinning these crises. This structural contradiction between decentralised governance and centralised remedial measures explained why similar milk scandals resurfaced after the 2008 crackdown. The same pattern could be found in many more areas beyond food safety, where once the crackdown initiated by the central government swept over, the same problems would resurge shortly afterwards. The persistent and frequent occurrence of China's industrial accidents (especially coal mine explosions), despite campaign after campaign reinforcing workplace health and safety, best exemplifies this: as long as the incentive structure (extractive central-local fiscal relations results in local preferences for quick fiscal revenue by whatever means) leading to these accidents is left unresolved, the limited effect of crackdown campaigns can be quickly undone by path dependency. The persistence of copyright infringements all over the country provides another good example.

In more recent crises, powerful local or departmental vested interests as a result of over-decentralisation even effectively neutralised the central government's attempts at centralising power from the very beginning. The train crash that occurred near Wenzhou in July 2011 was an example where the centralisation of power was widely perceived as

superficial. After the deadly train crash that killed 40 passengers and injured 172 (Xinhua, 2011a), the Chinese government centralised power by establishing a State Council-led investigation taskforce in order to find out the cause of the accident and step up railway safety enforcement. However, the taskforce membership revealed that some of its members were from the MOR, including its vice-minister acting as the vice-chair of this supposedly independent taskforce (People's Net, 2011b). The media and the public were outraged by this announcement because the MOR was a unique ministry with a dual but conflicting identity – it was the only railway operator in the PRC but at the same time it was charged with governmental responsibility to regulate and supervise its own operations. The involvement of senior MOR officials clearly undermined the perceived neutrality of this taskforce, as well as the central government's commitment to state autonomy free from MOR influence. In the face of mounting pressure, the State Council eventually had to exclude MOR officials from the taskforce (Ifeng.com, 2011).

On a related note, political accountability that is indispensable to the centralisation of power, as we have seen in SARS, also becomes a focus of contention in recent crises. Many officials that took the blame were later found to have been reinstated or even promoted to other positions in other regions, as we have seen in the milk scandal. Even worse, there emerged a propensity in recent years that whenever a crisis occurred, the government would find a scapegoat outside the system to deflect attention away from those officials in the bureaucracy who might be responsible. For example, in a fire that burned CCTV's new headquarters under construction in Beijing, and another fire that occurred in Shanghai shortly after the 2010 Expo killing at least 58, which prompted a State Council investigation, the government invariably laid the blame on 'temporary workers' who ignored safety rules (Express News, 2011), while implicated senior officials escaped from

punishment. The centralisation of power was gradually losing its utility in shaking up the bureaucracy and demonstrating a high degree of state autonomy.

For social unrest, the centralisation of power triggered the over-mobilisation of China's internal security apparatus, creating tensions in state-society relations. As mentioned above, China's internal security apparatus gained increasing clout over crisis management in recent years. Owing to their preoccupation with order and static stability, internal security forces tended to resort to oppression as the default response to social unrest, regardless of its origin. Such responses often pushed the public-private boundary with the use of restrictive and sometimes extra-judicial measures. During February and March 2011, China's response to the domestic repercussions of the Jasmine Revolution provided the best example in this respect. The call for political change might explain why the government responded strongly, but it was the overreaction of the internal security apparatus to a handful of demonstrators that reinforced the repressive impression of the CCP regime. The extra-judicial detention and 'temporary disappearance' imposed on many rights activists, including dissident artist Ai Weiwei, undid much of China's commitment to improving human rights and rule by law. The CCP's image was also damaged internationally as a result.

Even for social unrest that did not threaten the regime, the government response was still heavy-handed. For instance, a large number of protests were staged across China in recent years, concerned with the degradation of the local environment as a result of industrial development. Most of these protests were suppressed by internal security forces in the name of preserving static stability. Such suppression not only blocked potentially regime-enhancing rightful resistance, but extinguished local initiatives for a paradigm shift in the growth model or even towards participatory political reform – both of which are

badly needed for the current political system. In short, the over-centralisation of power has forced the regime operating in a constant crisis mode, which has endangered its resilience.

7.2.3 Reconnecting with the People

In the long term, reconnecting with the people is perhaps the political utility that will decline the most. As previously argued, the political utility of the Party's embracing the people in crisis rests upon the premise that the people perceive the central government as more benevolent and legitimate than local governments. However, this popularly held perceptual difference is not taken for granted, and may be quickly diluted by the information revolution which empowers the people to deconstruct what they believed or imagined in the past.

Information technology will have profound political implications for the generational gap and the digital gap currently existing in the population. On the one hand, information technology will widen the knowledge gap between generations who use or do not use the Internet. Traditional paper media and state television may still be propagating stories reinforcing the perception that although local governments might be corrupt, the central government is righteous enough and will eventually address local disobedience. Propaganda like this might still convince members of the unwired generation who have few alternative sources of information; however, the wired, younger generation tends to hold much weaker beliefs than the unwired, older generation that the central government is more legitimate, thanks to the ample availability of information on the Internet about the self-enriching nature of the central government. Previously mentioned cases where members of the top leadership echelon eat super safe food and breathe specially purified air, whilst food scares and hazardous air quality are part of everyday life for the ordinary

people, are good examples. But discussions on these sensitive topics have never appeared on traditional media and are only known to the online population. In addition, this younger and wired generation who has not experienced the bitter memory of the Cultural Revolution, poverty and scarcity, naturally exhibits a higher expectation of government conduct than the older generation. What might seem to the older generation as huge improvements compared to the past might be considered intolerable by the well informed, younger generation.

On the other hand, information technology will narrow the digital gap that previously existed between social strata as well as between rural and urban residents. As more people from less advantaged backgrounds own mobile devices and have Internet access, information effervescence previously enjoyed by urban dwellers now also becomes part of everyday life for migrant workers and even people in the countryside. The political consequences of a high Internet penetration rate is that, as more people have alternative sources of information, the imagined difference in the level of integrity between central and local governments will be diluted. In particular, the advent of social media in China since 2009 is accelerating this dilution. The Wenzhou train crash best demonstrated the political impact of instant and interactive communication on popular perceptions about the integrity of the central government.

Shortly after the train crash, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao made routine gestures of showing sympathy to the victims and the injured. They called for ‘all-out efforts to rescue passengers’ and sent Zhang Dejiang, Vice Premier in charge of transportation and industry, to oversee the rescue at the scene (Xinhua, 2011a). However, on the following day, the train wreckage was destroyed and buried and rescue efforts ended earlier than the public expected (a young girl was later found still alive by the police after the official rescue effort ended) (The Telegraph, 2011). The reason behind this rushed rescue was that the

government wanted to resume rail operations as soon as possible to avoid economic losses¹⁰⁷, and Vice Premier Zhang also urged the rescue team to ‘clear the accident scene as soon as possible’ in order to reopen the line (Xinhua, 2011a).

Unsurprisingly, the government’s inhumane handling of the crisis was met by immediate public fury. The apparent inconsistency between the rhetoric and actual behaviour of the central government also raised the question among the people as to whether the central government was as legitimate as they previously imagined or hoped. The fact that top leaders showed benevolence and stressed the importance of saving lives, whereas the central government prioritised economic growth over people’s lives and dignity, has made the Party’s reconnecting with the people hypocritical. To be fair, the government’s handling of the crisis was no worse than before, as it was stipulated in a State Council regulation regarding railway accidents that priority should be given to resuming operations (but in the same regulation how long the rescue effort should last was not specified). It was also the MOR’s standard operating procedure to bury the train wreckage after an accident (Southern Metropolis Daily, 2011). What made the Wenzhou train crash outrage the people was that this time people perceived the central government differently, as they received alternative information from social media.

The crash occurred in the suburb of Wenzhou where a large number of migrant workers lived. They rushed to the crash site and flooded the social media site, Weibo, with first-hand information in the forms of tweets, photos and footage they sent through mobile devices. The rest of the nation had already known the story before the Central Propaganda Department issued a media gag. As these authentic sources of information were disseminated instantly by eyewitnesses and citizen reporters, the central government-led rescue effort was highly visible and under close scrutiny. In the past, people accorded a

¹⁰⁷ This important rail line connects Shanghai, Hangzhou and Xiamen. Suspending operations for long will incur significant economic losses.

high level of legitimacy to the central government largely because of what it *said* in the rhetoric, which was carefully tailored and disseminated through state media in a top-down fashion. With social media sites available, more people started to re-evaluate the standing of the central government based on what it actually *did* on the ground – the details of which were updated by the people themselves almost every minute. It was this sea change in the means of communication and the characteristics of information flow that led to an overwhelmingly negative public perception of the central government's standing, even though the government merely repeated what it had done in the past. For a week or so, public criticism was on the boil, but this time the top leadership seemed to close ranks to defend themselves again – no single PSC member responded or made a public statement. Eventually, Wen Jiabao had to appear in public to end this government credibility debacle. He visited the crash site and made an apology, like he did in the milk scandal. But this time it seemed he came too late and was desperate for forgiveness – he explained that he could not have arrived earlier because he was ill - a very unusual statement given that China always regards the health of top leaders as a state secret (Reuters, 2011).

7.3 The CCP's Crisis Management at a Crossroads

So far in the conclusion we have evaluated the strengths and weaknesses, and short-term versus long-term efficacy of the CCP's crisis management. In the section below we explore the implications of these on the CCP's capacity to handle future crises. Rather than simply making predictions, we look at the underlying forces that will enhance or undermine the current CCP-style crisis management, and determine which forces are more likely to triumph over the others.

On the upside for the CCP, China in the near future will be a high-risk society where crises of all kinds are likely to increase both in number and in intensity. This is determined by China's current stage of development. As a late developing country, China is simultaneously undergoing industrialisation, urbanisation, informatisation, globalisation and democratisation. Unlike in western industrialised societies where these transformations came one-by-one and over a period of several centuries, the same transformations are taking place in China in a much denser fashion. In other words, China is absorbing the confluent impacts of these transformations over several decades, including the impact of multifarious crises that are bred out of these transformations. This already immense challenge is compounded by China's weak governance and institutions, the development of which significantly lagged behind the new political, social, economic and technological landscape.

In this regard, China's crisis-prone risk society is somehow good for the CCP. As strata become more divided and society becomes more conflictual (People's Net, 2013), the desire for stability is increasing. Not coincidentally, this societal demand for stability assurance matches the CCP's updated matrix of legitimating resources in which its ability to provide stability has been emphasised more recently (Sandby-Thomas, 2011; Weatherley, 2006). On the one hand, well informed citizens may no longer consider the CCP as having *legitimacy*, but still accept its rule for its *instrumental utility*, including its provision of stability. On the other hand, the CCP may find the constellation of societal contradictions a perfect condition for crisis manipulation and for enhancing its people's saviour myth. It can thus sustain its rule through the social engineering of divide and rule. But if the CCP is not cautious enough as to whom it represents, its rule may slide into becoming client based – after all, from the perspective of some exclusive strata, the desire for stability may well mean the demand for the CCP's repression of other strata.

On the down side for the CCP, however, it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain a hegemonic crisis discourse, without which the CCP's authoritarian advantages in crisis management may become irrelevant. The rise of alternative crisis discourses at the expense of the official version is paralleled with the people's rising ability to deconstruct Party rhetoric as they receive more alternative sources of information.

Even within the system itself, the CCP is facing the challenge of locally articulated crisis discourses that deviate from the official one articulated by the centre. And, for this particular phenomenon, we have to mention the Chongqing political scandal and Bo Xilai, whose manoeuvre in Chongqing and its nationwide repercussions led to the CCP's largest legitimacy crisis since 1989 (Li, 2012).

When Bo became Party chief of Chongqing in 2007, he subtly picked and mixed local social ills and portrayed these as indicative of a crisis of the neoliberal development model implemented nationally under Hu-Wen. He depicted Chongqing under his predecessors as a hotbed of gangsters (the origins of which were attributed to economic inequality and social dislocation) in order to justify his decisive intervention. From 2008 on, Bo made a series of radical moves to tackle this constructed crisis in Chongqing. In managing the crisis, he invoked the CCP's standard tripartite crisis manipulation strategy, albeit with different content.

He articulated a shift away from the dominating paradigm promoted by Beijing, i.e. from the market orientation to a more socialist and egalitarian orientation, especially in social policies. For example, he initiated a large scale public housing programme, one of the largest in China. He centralised political control and shook up the bureaucracy. This was widely disputed because it seemed he purged most of the officials close to his predecessors and instead promoted people loyal to himself, making Chongqing an 'independent kingdom' politically. The most prominent figure was undoubtedly his aide

Wang Lijun. Bo also reconnected with the ordinary people by resorting to Maoist symbols, such as mass campaigns to tackle crime, ‘smashing the criminals’, and to promote populist culture, ‘singing the red (revolutionary) songs’.

After Wang Lijun fled to the US embassy in Chengdu and as Bo himself was implicated in a murder, Bo was disgraced (BBC, 2013). More evidence emerged that Bo fabricated the Chongqing crisis in order to make himself eligible for the top position in the CCP. For the entire period from Wang’s flight to Bo’s prosecution, people closely followed the unfolding of the scandal on social media and watched this as a political soap opera.

What makes the Chongqing scandal perceived differently by the people is not to do with corruption or the abuse of power; after all, these are not uncommon with other disgraced officials. It is unique in that with social media available, people were able to watch closely and to discuss in real time an ongoing political scandal. Arguably, what makes the Chongqing scandal the largest legitimacy crisis since 1989 is not about how Bo could go so far before being disgraced, but that the people learnt as they watched, that elements within the CCP could fabricate and manipulate a crisis with ease and often at will. To a large extent, the Chongqing scandal devastated the credibility of the Party’s (or part of the Party’s) discourse on crisis, because people would become wary of any Party discourses on crisis or even discredit them altogether. When the next crisis discourse is articulated and propagated, will it just be another rerun of Chongqing?

With our arguments taken together, there will be many more crises waiting to be handled by the CCP but on which it can no longer impose a hegemonic definition. It is difficult to give a black or white answer as to which forces will triumph over the others. It is without doubt that in the future the CCP will find it more difficult to enlist overwhelming public support, after people learnt through the Chongqing scandal that a

crisis could so easily fall into manipulative hands. With people recognising the existence of competing crisis discourses, it is also likely that elements within and without the political system will try to articulate alternative crisis discourses – Bo perhaps is not the only one and he will not be the last.

However, it is also too early to suggest that under such complex conditions, the relevance of CCP-style crisis management will simply wither away. As suggested in the above discussion, part of the CCP's current style of crisis management – for example, the centralisation of power – can still be highly useful in handling natural disasters. In other words, the relevance of some elements of the CCP's crisis management may be retained even if it is losing the capacity to monopolise the definition of crisis. The implication of this might be that the CCP should concentrate its efforts on enhancing its capacity to manage those non-manipulative (or with minimal traits to be manipulated) crises. Ideally, crises of this kind may include all those external shocks where the origin is exogenous and, of course, purely exogenous crises are rare. The point is that the CCP can try to maximise its strength when managing predominantly exogenous crises in order to compensate for its declining ability to define and manipulate crises. With the remarkable progress it has made so far in terms of the professionalisation of crisis management, especially at the operational level, the task of demonstrating relevance when it comes to exogenous crises is still achievable for the CCP.

7.4 Directions for Future Research

This thesis has made the first attempt at constructing a generalised model for crisis management under the CCP. The explanatory strengths of this model have already been demonstrated in our three case studies as well as in more recent crises. Nonetheless, some

limitations of this model are also inevitable. In addition, the politics of crisis management in China is an ongoing and evolving research agenda. Some possible avenues to enhance this research are suggested here as the author realised these while completing this study.

At present, our generalised model is capable of explaining the CCP's crisis response where two levels of government, the central government and the local government, are both involved. Only when the two levels of government interact with each other in a crisis can our comprehension about the CCP's centralisation of power and (the central government's bypassing the local government to) reconnecting with the people be relevant. Yet situations like these are rare, compared to countless local crises China faces every day. In other words, our model is strong in explaining *major* crises where urgent situations prompted central government intervention, whereas *everyday* crises – occurring and handled at the local level only – may or may not fit this model well. As China's ongoing tendency to decentralise governance shows few signs of reversion, it is this type of local crisis that will beset China's political system on a daily basis and consume the majority of China's overall crisis management resources. Future research designs with an emphasis on discerning common traits at the local level, and thus generalising local crisis responses, will enhance our current model in terms of wider applicability.

In addition, as argued in the introduction, this thesis contributes to the existing literature on Chinese crisis management by bringing politics back into the analysis. As a consequence, this thesis employed a CCP-centric perspective and primarily focused on how the CCP behaved. Yet as we have seen in the civic effervescence during the Sichuan earthquake, and more recently in the Wukan crisis, approaching the topic of crisis management from below is as important as approaching it from above. At the moment, there have been a number of cases where the empowered public actively articulated interests and actually reversed the direction of the response to the crisis, such as in the

Wenzhou train crash and Wukan. However, there is not enough evidence about whether this transformative momentum will continue to affect policy making in normal politics. Future research that determines whether civic effervescence during and after crises will give rise to a real Habermasian public sphere under normal circumstances will be very helpful in explaining the complete trajectory of Chinese crisis management.

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